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ABSTRACT

A number of studies have demonstrated the existence of "effective" schools in comparison to other "ineffective" models. To identify the contexts for success, a study examined "teacher instructional" and "school" variables to characterize the complex of factors that might be needed to achieve high levels of student success. The research involved six successful and six less-successful schools in Vermont, representing three distinct clusters of school/community demographics. Interviewed and observed were 52 K-4 teachers in the successful schools and 25 K-4 teachers in the less-successful schools. Other school and district personnel were also interviewed. Findings suggest a great diversity of practices was employed within and throughout the clusters and classroom sites--a variety of approaches to instruction existed. Findings indicated that throughout the six successful schools representing different demographic clusters, the following common factors are associated with high performance: opportunities and ample time are provided for students to read and discuss books in school; the K-4 teachers are knowledgeable and articulate about their work and they can be characterized by their high level of expertise; the commitment to literacy within the high-performing schools has remained strong over an 8-to-10-year period; and the school community is focused and working toward a shared vision. Includes a table and 5 figures. (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

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Elementary Schools Where Students Succeed in Reading

Jim Mosenthal, Marjorie Lipson, Jane Mekkelsen, Barbara Russ, Susan Sortino

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Elementary Schools Where Students Succeed in Reading

Jim Mosenthal, Marjorie Lipson, Jane Mekkelsen, Barbara Russ, Susan Sortino

The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory

a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University

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Contexts and Practices of Successful Schools

Background

A number of studies have demonstrated the existence of "effective" schools in comparison to other "ineffective" models. A recent analysis of 50 years of research suggests that "the different kinds of classroom instruction and climate had nearly as much impact on learning as the student aptitude categories" (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). In addition, the culture of the school can inform students of the acceptable forms of achievement and motivation (Dreeben, 1968). Features of the school such as its size, neighborhood, and structure, also influence students' motivation and achievement by affecting their expectations for success, self-esteem, and performance (Schmuck, 1980). It is clear that a number of school and non-school factors influence student achievement in literacy. However, much of this research is correlational, demonstrating only that norm-referenced test scores (the most common student outcome) are positively related to another factor.

More recently, researchers across the country have been examining "beat the odds" schools for evidence of successful practice. (Snyder, 1999; Langer, 1999; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). While the convergence of findings is quite stunning (see, for example, Lipson et al., 1999, and Taylor et al., 2000), there are still remarkably few rich studies of the contexts for success, studies that

identify "successful" schools and then examine the *range* and *interaction* of factors that might account for students' success in those schools by means of a qualitative methodology. Our study differs from others in that we studied *teacher instructional* and *school* variables in order to characterize the complex of factors that might be needed to achieve high levels of student success, particularly in schools that do not have a well-prepared and economically privileged student population. In addition, the existing studies have not used standards-based measures, making it difficult to determine whether students have acquired sophisticated and challenging levels of literacy.

What we did

This research involved six successful and three less-successful schools, representing three distinct clusters of school/community demographics. We interviewed and observed 52 grade K–4 teachers in the successful schools and 25 K–4 teachers in the less-successful schools. In addition, we interviewed the school principals, curriculum coordinators, and librarians; the district superintendents; and, where appropriate, other individuals. For example, in some buildings we interviewed all the paraeducators, whereas in other buildings we interviewed the special educator and reading teacher.

To determine demographic clusters of Vermont schools, we used two resources: the *Vermont Department of Education School Report* (University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies, 1998) and data on the number of non-English language or bilingual students enrolled in Vermont schools from the University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies (1998). Using these data, we identified factors known to

influence student performance, including common demographics such as community, socio-economic status, and educational attainment of parents. We also considered size of school, size of community, degree of "rurality," and diversity of student population. A cluster analysis resulted in identifying clusters that linked the state's schools and communities in three "context tiers" that differ in size. The school clusters are significantly different statistically. The largest contrasts in the groups of schools exist between the "Country"[1] schools cluster (number of Country schools = 79) and the much smaller "Uptown" schools cluster (number of Uptown schools = 36).

Country schools are generally small, poor, and located in rural areas with large numbers of adults who have not completed any school work beyond high school. Indeed, on average, almost 25% of the adults in these communities do *not* have a high school diploma (actual percentage = 23.35%). These schools have the largest numbers of children identified as eligible for special education services (10-11%). There are very few teachers and even fewer instructional aides or other support personnel in these schools. Teachers are paid significantly less than their counterparts in the other clusters because local taxes, with limited state funding, have traditionally supported Vermont schools, resulting in great variability of funding from community to community. Country schools comprised 79% of Vermont elementary schools.

Main Street schools are, on average, significantly larger than Country schools. There are more classroom teachers and more support teachers and instructional aides. There are significantly more adults in these communities with a college education. Approximately 43% of the adults in these communities have at least some college education and another 35% have a high school education. However, these numbers are all smaller than for the "Uptown" schools. Teachers in

Main Street schools earn significantly more than their colleagues in Country schools and significantly less than their peers in Uptown schools. This is a more diverse group of schools than either of the other clusters, although many are located in small towns. These schools tend to exist in the many small towns of Vermont, which are neither rural areas nor urban or suburban regions. Of the 219 Vermont elementary schools, 104 (48%) were clustered as Main Street schools.

Uptown schools are generally larger than Main Street schools, and they are the most affluent of Vermont schools. Adults in these communities are well-educated; on average, more than 30% of the adults in these communities have at least a college degree (actual percentage = 31.47%). These schools have the largest class size and the largest ratio of students to teachers, although the averages are still quite modest by national standards. These schools house the fewest children identified as eligible for special education services, but have the largest number of limited English proficient (LEP) students. There are many instructors in these schools: regular classroom teachers, "other teachers," and very large numbers of instructional aides. The mean teacher's salary is much higher than in any other group, probably reflecting both larger base salaries and a more experienced cadre of teachers. Thirty-six of the 219 Vermont elementary schools were clustered as Uptown schools.

To select high-performing schools within each cluster, we looked at data from the state reading test, administered at second grade, and the two reading components of the New Standards Reference Exams (NSRE) administered statewide at fourth grade. Both tests were administered in spring of 1998. The VT-DRA and the NSRE data were used to insure selection of schools with strong literacy performance–and thus strong practices and programs–throughout the elementary grades.

Based on the spring test results, we selected schools in which at least 80% of the students in second grade had performed at or above the standard in reading and also in which at least 80% of the students in fourth grade had achieved at or above the standard on both the basic understanding and analysis/interpretation components of the NSRE. This selection process yielded a very small number of schools, with schools from each cluster represented. Of the 79 Country schools, five schools (6%) met the selection criteria. Of the 104 Main Street schools, eight (8%) were identified, and five (14%) of the 36 Uptown schools met the selection criteria. We selected two of these high-performing schools from within each cluster.

In addition, we identified at least one additional school at or near the bottom of student performance for each cluster. The less-successful schools were tracked for one additional year. The spring 1999 results were added to those for spring 1998 to ensure stability in student performance trends. Three schools, matched to the characteristics of the high-performing schools in each cluster, became the sites for data collection in the qualitative study of classrooms, schools, and communities reported in this investigation.

Data collection

Data collection at the selected schools took place from September 1999 through January 2000. Primary data came from observations and interviews with each teacher, administrator, instructional assistant, and librarian. Observations—requiring from 8 to 15 day-long observations of each school depending upon its size—were conducted in all K–4 classrooms. The focus of observation was on the language arts practices and the integration of language arts activity within

other content areas. In addition to the observations, K–4 teachers and school administrators were each interviewed formally in one long interview, and informally through a series of on-site conversations. The focus of these interviews was to understand from the perspective of school personnel what factors influence their students' literacy performance.

Although the K–4 teachers and school administrators received the bulk of the researchers' attention, the methodology called for following up on statements by school personnel that implicated other people, programs, and organizations in influencing the school's test performance. Thus, if it appeared that there were significant non-school factors related to students' success, these were explored through observation and interviews. Throughout the data collection period, we identified critical attributes and themes in these settings in an effort to fully describe the specific contexts for success. Ultimately, the goal of the study is to understand the complex and interrelated factors contributing to school success, or lack of success.

What we found

We found it intriguing that a great diversity of practices was employed within and throughout the clusters and classroom sites. Whether instructional variation was reflected in literature-based programs or school-wide basal programs, there was no consistent picture of a high performing school or classroom, regardless of the community served by the school. A variety of approaches to instruction existed.

On the other hand, our findings indicate that throughout the six successful

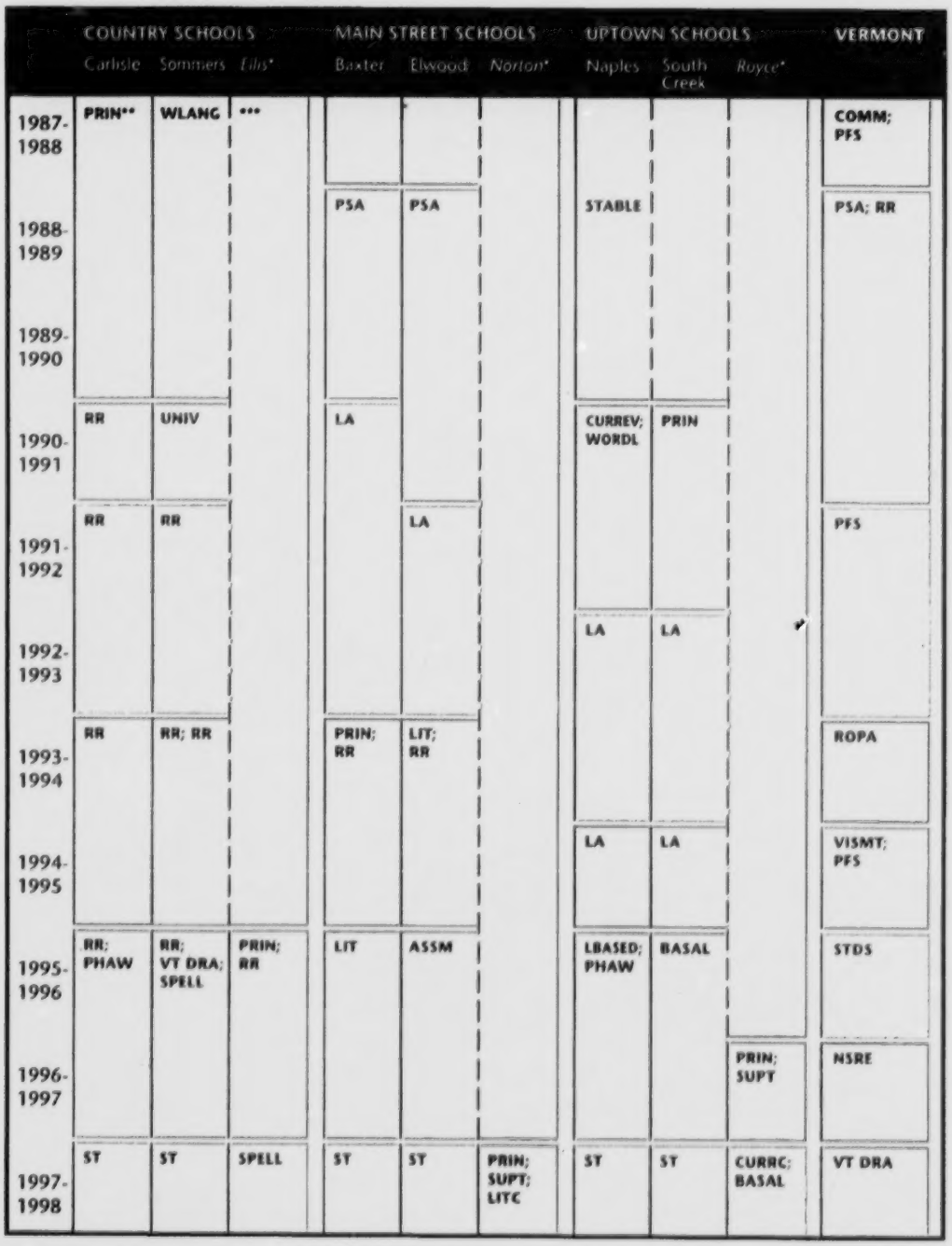
schools representing different demographic clusters, the following common factors *are* associated with high performance:

- **Opportunities** and ample time are provided for students to read and discuss books in school. There is an extensive collection of books in the classroom and school that are *accessible* and used. Kids read.
- The K–4 teachers are knowledgeable and articulate about their work and they can be characterized by their high level of **expertise**. Instruction is lively and well-managed. Time is spent on instruction and practice.
- The **commitment** to literacy and literacy improvement within the high-performing schools has remained strong over an eight- to ten-year period. There has been and continues to be extensive professional development and strong, stable leadership, whether from a teacher, a principal, or some other member of the school community.
- The **school community** is focused and working toward a shared vision, with genuine respect and ongoing open communication among the staff.

At the school level, the key factors for success were based on autonomy, communication, and curricular and instructional leadership over an eight- to ten-year period. **Figure 1** contrasts the timeline of development or lack thereof in our six successful schools and their three less-successful counterparts. In addition, classroom-level variables common to all schools appeared to be explanatory: time spent on reading, quantity of books in the classroom, high degree of expertise or knowledge among teachers, block scheduling for literacy, lively pace of instruction, and excellent classroom management. **Table 1** presents data on "opportunity to read and discuss books," contrasting the successful and less-successful schools.

FIGURE 1

Long-term commitment to literacy of successful vs. less-successful schools, 1988-1998



*Indicates less-successful schools. **Abbreviations identify the nature of continuous development within the school or school district. **Abbreviation descriptions can be found on page 114.** ***Solid lines indicate the duration of continuous development within the school or school district; dashed lines indicate the absence of continuous development.

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TABLE 1
Opportunity to read and discuss books

Demographic clusters and more and less-successful schools*	Estimated number of books per classroom	Estimated minutes reading per day	Estimated minutes teacher reads aloud per day	Total minutes reading or listening to text per day
COUNTRY				
Carlisle	▲675	30	25	55
Sommers	▲200	50	20	70
Ellis	*Range 50-700*	*20*	*15*	*35*
UPTOWN				
Naples	▲650	30	25	55
South Creek	▲185	50	20	70
Royce	*Range 25-800*	*10*	*15*	*35*
MAIN STREET				
Baxter	▲475	50	20	70
Elwood	▲685	50	25	75
Norton	*Range 50-600*	*20*	*25*	*45*

*Successful schools (**regular print**) scored high on the VT DRA and New Standards Reference Examination Reading Subtests administered in the spring 1998 (> 80% of students scored ***above*** the grade level standard); schools in ***italics*** were less successful on the two tests (> 80% of students scored ***below*** the grade level standard).

We have used the data from the less-successful schools to validate and confirm the conclusions we have drawn about successful schools. All of the major influences evident in the highly successful schools are either not present or are less evident in the less-successful schools. For example, although all six of the suc-

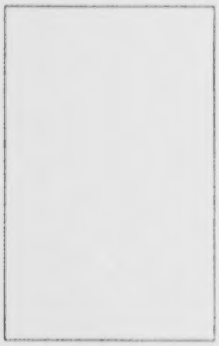
cessful schools had maintained a focus on literacy over a long time period, aided by either staff or administrative stability, the less-successful schools were all marked by considerable administrative upheaval, limited professional development, and lack of common vision. Similarly, even in the most affluent of less-successful schools, there are many fewer books in classrooms and much less evidence of reading.

We have also been able to refine our understanding of some of the findings from the earlier investigation. For example, classroom management is a subtle variable that is linked to teacher goals and expertise. In the successful schools, teachers used their excellent classroom management skills to accomplish multiple tasks at differing levels of difficulty, and in doing so they accommodated diverse student abilities. In the less-successful schools, teachers were much more likely to manage classrooms using a teacher-directed style that required all students to accomplish the same tasks at the same time.

What seems clear, both throughout and within clusters, is that less-successful schools have not created contexts that encourage productive teacher conversation, engaging professional development, or classroom environments that promote high performance. The experienced teachers in less-successful schools appear wedded to long-standing practices, whereas teachers in successful schools appear able to refine or reinvent themselves over time. Successful schools give teachers a significant degree of autonomy in making decisions about how to shape literacy programs. At the same time, these schools have worked hard to create a coherent and consistent schoolwide experience. Less-successful schools either do not work toward this professional community or have been engaged in the enterprise for too little time to realize the results.

The case studies

In the next sections, we have presented three case studies. Each case involves one of our three clusters and within each case we discuss three schools. Each of the successful schools from each cluster is described in some detail in order to capture the variety and richness of activity that contribute to successful student performance in literacy. Following these descriptions, we discuss the less-successful school from that cluster. Finally, we discuss the ways in which the schools seem to reflect the particular cluster to which they belong, highlighting the contextualized nature of school success.



Successful "Country" Schools: Carlisle and Sommers

Overview of the Country cluster of schools

Carlisle and Sommers Schools[1] are both members of our Country school cluster, representing approximately 36% of all the schools in Vermont. Like their counterparts, Carlisle and Sommers are very small and very rural. Carlisle has 110 students in K–6 and Sommers has 160 students in K–8. The village of Carlisle and the village of Sommers are quite remote, although they are in proximity to more extensive services and opportunities; One is five miles from a ski area with resort-like services, shops, and restaurants, while the other is about 15 miles from a small state college and its surrounding town.

Also like their counterparts, Carlisle and Sommers residents are poor and poorly educated. More than 23% of the people in Sommers and 29% of the adults in Carlisle do not have a high school diploma (and about 14% of those have less than a ninth-grade education). In Sommers, only 18% of the adults have attained any education beyond the high school level; 34% of Carlisle's community have done so. Not surprisingly, there are very few professionals in this community. In the words of one teacher, these are "people who are laborers, loggers,

[1] The terms "Country," "Main Street," and "Uptown" are fictionalized names that are designed to help the reader characterize the nature of these clusters in the broadest terms. Within each cluster there is considerable variability and, inevitably, at least some schools seem to be a poor fit to the primary cluster attributes. School names and names of persons are also fictionalized, with no significance attached to their pseudonyms.

seasonal workers and farmers." The families do have strong links to the community however, and teachers report relatively little transience. Of the students in the school, 52% receive free or reduced-cost lunch.

There is no question when we visit these rural schools that size and location are factors contributing to their success. The stories of these schools seem to result, in part, from the very smallness of their buildings. In each school there are, on average, 13 students per grade level in grades 1–4. Lest there be a temptation to attribute their success to their size alone, it needs to be noted that the Country cluster schools in Vermont have traditionally been among the least successful in terms of conventional achievement. These schools have a high degree of poverty and their communities are isolated. Among our clusters, the Country cluster has the fewest "first-tier" schools and the most extremely low performers. Teachers are paid very poorly in the Country schools (average $28,789, significantly lower than in either of the other two clusters), and despite the small classes, they work hard.

The Carlisle and Sommers schools have remarkably similar histories and instructional programs. The larger professional development environment in Vermont from the late 1980s to the late 1990s was vibrant, and these are teachers and schools that took advantage of that environment. In both schools, teachers and administrators point to two overriding factors that account for the level of their students' performance: an individual, influential teacher, and the Reading Recovery program. Approximately ten years ago, the teachers in each school began to undertake real change. In each school, one energetic and inspiring colleague was trained as a Reading Recovery teacher during the 1991–1993 time frame. These teachers influenced their colleagues; they modeled strategies, took their team-

mates to conferences, and shared their enthusiasm for a methodology they believed really made a difference for individual children.

With respect to instruction, teachers in both schools were strongly influenced by New Zealand models. Reading Recovery provides service to individual children and guided reading practices (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996) characterize classroom literacy work. In both buildings, skills are explicitly taught and literature is infused throughout reading instruction. Although the teachers take skills instruction seriously, they embed it in literature and offer it somewhat opportunistically. The teachers in these two schools have devoted large amounts of time to literacy (from one-and-a-half to two hours a day). During these periods, children read a great deal. Children have access to and utilize many books within the classroom or the school library.

These teachers and students spend their time in classrooms that are exceptionally well-managed. The classroom environments look informal, but the students and teachers are very focused on the work at hand. Although there are challenging children in these classrooms, the teachers are highly skilled and the paraeducators and special education assistants provide additional support. Consequently, almost all of the allocated time for literacy is engaged time.

These two overarching stories share similar traits. In these schools, success in literacy can be attributed to several major influences: teacher autonomy, ongoing professional development, collaboration among faculty, ongoing assessment, and responsive teaching. All these attributes seem to grow from the universally strong commitment of the schools and teachers to teach every child individually.

Carlisle Elementary School

One of the Country schools in our study is Carlisle, nestled in a remote village near one of the state's larger ski areas. It is a small school. Its school population of 110 in grades K–6 is distributed among the following classrooms:

- **three collaborative K-1-2 multi-age classrooms**
- **two collaborative 3–4 multi-age classrooms**

Like their counterparts in this cluster, Carlisle is a poor community and its citizens are poorly educated. Twenty-nine percent of the adults do not have a high school diploma (and about 14% of those have less than a ninth-grade education). Thirty-four percent of Carlisle's community has attained an education beyond the high school level. A little more than half of the school's population (52%) qualifies for free or reduced-cost lunch. Teachers' salaries, too, typify the socio-economic portrait: The average salary is $28,707, whereas the average salary in the "Uptown" cluster is $41,476.

It is not surprising that there are few professionals in this community. Many people are employed seasonally by the nearby resort. The families do have strong links to the community and school, however. As a matter of fact, the community library is a part of the school's physical structure, making the school appear to be the hub of the community.

Driving into the village and approaching the school, one is greeted by an informative and welcoming sign—a message to all who pass by, community members and strangers alike:

> "Children Are The Future"
> Cat in the Hat Party
> Staff and Students Read
> 31,165 pages in 1 week
> (in recognition of Dr. Seuss's birthday)

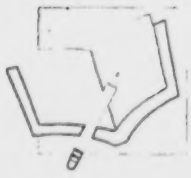
The message is loud and clear: "We, as a community, value and give priority to our children and their literacy development."

A strong sense of community pervades this small school. Each school day begins with the *entire* school assembling outdoors for the flag salute, morning greetings, announcements, and singing. Physical space is at a premium. Thus, teachers work in close quarters with each other—classrooms double as music and art rooms; multi-age teams eat lunch together rotating into each other's spaces—and have opportunities to reflect on the physical learning environment and curriculum. One primary grade teacher is also the afternoon Reading Recovery teacher and the trainer for the numerous America Reads volunteers who dominate the school. Gerald, the principal, knows all the children intimately and is very aware of the daily curriculum that is taking place in each classroom. Field notes portray him casually interacting with a half-day student during writing time. The child has "graduated" from representing thoughts via illustrations to adding

words to her entry, and her teacher calls Gerald over to acknowledge the accomplishment. He enthusiastically obliges and the child is beaming! He literally wears many hats, including one that resembles that of Dr. Seuss's *famous cat,* at the celebration of the children's accomplishment: reading to their challenge of 10,000 pages in a week (the school actually read over 30,000). Field notes repeatedly refer to the "sense of family, fun and community" that prevails throughout the days spent here.

Knowledge, expertise, and opportunity to read

The teachers and students spend their time in classrooms that are exceptionally well-managed. The classroom environments look informal, but the students and teachers are very workmanlike. Hardly any time is taken with transitions or behavior management. Although there are challenging children in these classrooms, the teachers are highly skilled and have high expectations. The children understand that and, consequently, almost all of the allocated time for literacy ends up being engaged time. Field notes reflect mere minutes in what could be major transition times. One entry notes:



10:45: ***chimes ring and signal the children to put their books, materials, pillows, etc., away. Children line up to move into the science room.***

10:50: ***New group is settled. Debbie has a group of five half-dayers sitting with her; the rest of the children are reading independently."***

The teachers are also articulate about the workmanlike pace to their days. They realize that different subjects are beginning to compete with each other for time and, as a result, they are thoughtful and efficient with the time they have.

Debbie, the morning K–2 teacher and afternoon Reading Recovery teacher, passionately shares her concern:

. . . feeling under pressure to get our children at a certain place and I feel that sometimes we're letting some parts of a balanced literacy program go by. We're having trouble reading every day to children and I just made a big issue of that because I thought especially with our kindergarten children we need to read to them every day, so we did just recently work that out so it would happen.

Patricia, one of the K–2 teachers and a math specialist, discusses her perspective on their multi-age program:

To me it pays off constantly having the older ones model for the younger ones in all areas and having them read. . . . Your struggling first-grade reader becomes a good reader to a half-dayer, so it's such a boost to self-esteem.

Julie and Audrey emphatically talk about their very high standards:

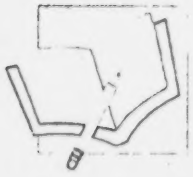
We're very clear with the kids about what the standards are; we rarely ever give an assignment that doesn't have "I expect you to have this, this, and this, here is your scoring guide." . . . We view reading and writing a lot like practicing like you would for multiplication facts; we just write every day and we read every day faithfully and we never give up.

The purposefulness, commitment, and management of instruction during literacy time is evident in the descriptions of literacy work in the K-1-2 and 3–4

classrooms given below. In general, the teachers at Carlisle devote large amounts of time to literacy (approximately 90 minutes each day), and the children read a great deal. At first glance it's obvious that there are large quantities of books in the classrooms. What's even more impressive is the fact that time is built in and prioritized for children to be engaged with books. (**See Table 1**).

The K-1-2 multi-age classrooms

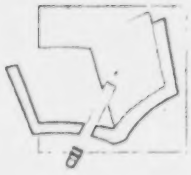
The three K-1-2 classrooms composing the primary unit have a daily read-aloud time and a minimum of 25 minutes each day when children are reading—either silently or aloud to an adult. In addition, children are engaged with text during their guided reading group times. Carlisle's infusion of America Reads volunteers ensures that children are getting a healthy dose of one-on-one time to read. There is also a daily read-aloud each morning after the morning school assembly. On one occasion, the K–2 children clustered into one of the classrooms to listen to the teacher read in their ongoing chapter book. Field notes record the following description:



The children settle in very quickly, and Carol begins reading Winter Days in the Woods by Laura Ingalls Wilder, while the other two teachers sit amongst the children. She finishes a chapter and poses an interpretive question to the whole group concerning Laura's reasoning behind a remark she made. Several children volunteer their responses. As that brief exchange winds down, Debbie, another of the team, reminds the group that it's time to move into their respective rooms. Within two minutes 47 children have efficiently dispersed to their respective classrooms to begin their morning focus.

There are large quantities of books that are accessible and inviting to children. One room in the K–2 classrooms is the "reading room" where over 1,000 books, neatly organized and, in most cases, leveled, are at the children's fingertips. One of the two interconnected 3–4 classrooms serves as the "library" for those grades and classrooms. There are an estimated 1,200 books provided for two grades and 28 children.

The K-1-2 teachers decided in 1996–97 to "teach to their strengths" and they now focus their individual attention on reading, math, and science and health blocks in their respective rooms. Thus the reading room—Debbie's room—is bustling all morning with three groups of K-1-2 students rotating in and out, engaged in self-directed, individualized reading instruction. Field notes describe the following:

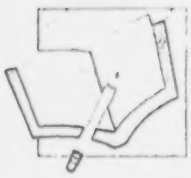


While Debbie sits with a small group of half-dayers (one is reading aloud to her; one is reading silently; and another is working on an "ABC" book—a reinforcement of letter/sound recognition the child needs support with), the other children are either at the

- ***listening center listening to a story on tape (goal is to work on fluency)***
- ***computer (working on a phonemic awareness game)***
- ***art center reading with an America Reads volunteer***
- ***various cozy book nooks and/or lofts reading self-selected books independently (there is a cozy antique bathtub lined with soft cushions, a perfect place to curl up with a good book).***

Debbie continues to be engaged with individual children for the entire time this group is in her room. She makes a priority of listening to the children read aloud, commenting on their reading ("point to each word as you read"), the nature

of the story ("perhaps we can look for a story that can be turned into a play next..."), and facilitating as needed, especially during opportune "teachable moments" ("if you come to a word you don't know..."). Both the teacher and the children revisit some strategies to use. Field notes record the following reaction:



So much "children learning from children." One little girl (half-dayer) wants to read a book she's not able to read yet. Mrs. D. realizes this and asks if someone will "read it to Sally; she can't read this one alone yet." Of course, someone obliges.

Debbie does not stop her interactions for the approximate half hour the group is in the room. She rings the chimes at the end of the time frame, the children line up to rotate into one of the other two classrooms, and a new group of K-1-2s enters hers. She repeats her repertoire, and a half hour later the third and last group enters. She and 47 K-1-2s have been actively, authentically involved with literature, and they appear proud and competent.

After lunch and recess the kindergartners are gone, and the first and second graders spend 60 minutes in the "reading room" again for a somewhat more formal literacy time. The primary teachers have been strongly influenced by New Zealand models and have adopted a guided reading approach. Reading Recovery provides essential service to individual children and also defines the types of classroom practice employed by the teachers. Phonological awareness, too, has taken on a priority. Thus, the ensuing block of literacy instruction is a balance of whole-group spelling and phonics instruction, flexible, small-group reading discussion groups, and individualized folder and workbook exercises.

The 3–4 multi-age classrooms

In the 3–4 grades, the teachers promote a very independent, individualized approach where children are engaged in self-selecting trade books, writing ongoing reading journal entries and summaries, conferencing with teachers, and sharing their new knowledge and interests with each other. The teachers stress the importance of teaching children to choose books at an appropriate level and expose them to all genres. Julie, one of the pair who have teamed together for five years, states:

we always start off the year with Reader's Workshop, which is teaching kids how to choose a book at the proper level and use the five finger rule system. And we go through teaching the kids how to write responses to particular questions (using a reading journal format). . . . Our daily routine is they're independently reading their own book which is at their level, and the next day they're writing a response about what they've read.

Julie and Audrey assert:

the most important thing we do is we invest a tremendous amount of time making sure our library has the appropriate amount of materials for our range of children. We want to make sure there's plenty to keep the fourth-graders reading at a sixth-grade or higher level challenged, whereas on the other end we might have this child reading a second-grade level and coming in as a third-grader and we've got a nice variety there. We're really open and we talk a lot about levels. Nothing's a baby book. We model how we like to read.

Audrey describes how the reading is connected to the journal writing:

We have pretty strict guidelines and what we accept for an acceptable response, so that they're writing two [or] three paragraphs. For example, the children are told explicitly to

1. *Put your name on your paper. Don't forget your name!*
2. *Use part of the question to start your response.*
3. *Tell where the best part is located.*
4. *Tell what the best part is about.*
5. *Use at least 2 sentences to explain why this is the best part.*

The quantity of books in the 3–4 team's classroom speaks clearly to how priority is given to literature and engagement with books. The two classrooms share approximately 1,200 books (multiple copies, all types of genres), and reading is ongoing throughout the day. The reader's workshop format is used, and Julie and Audrey share their strong commitment to several principles:

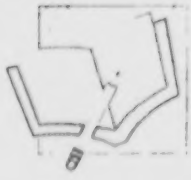
Work hard on having the children reading at their level; it's an important skill that we teach them, especially for the third graders. And we insist on them writing about their reading frequently. Our daily routine is they independently read their own books which are at their level and then the next day they're writing a response about what they've read. They're getting exposure to being reflective about what they're reading.

The 3–4 children are also part of a "Three Hundred Hour Club" that involves reading at home contractually for a total of ten hours. As a part of this contractual work, students commit to reading a certain number of pages during a Reader's Workshop time and are accountable for their progress. A bulletin board

outside the classroom informs the school community of their contractual progress. Field notes during a Reader's Workshop describe children

- ***researching independent projects via books and the computer and summarizing them***
- ***(during a group sharing format) reading a passage aloud from a book they're reading or story they're writing and asking for their peers' advice/perspective***
- ***engaging in "Story Sells" (share summaries or impressions) or "Magazine Critics," (critique a magazine article)***
- ***writing story summaries and/or reading journal entries***
- ***organizing for an exit interview of the independent book just completed***

Julie and Audrey describe how their approach to literacy instruction changes, usually in the spring, when book discussion groups take precedence over Reader's Workshop. Groups read a book together, focusing more on "book talks" than writing. They also work on story elements and presentation skills. The children are very computer literate and resourceful. There are high expectations for focused, quality work, and everyone is expected to support and learn from each other. Field notes stress that



teachers frequently call upon the students' peers to offer support, resources, perspectives and teaching as needed. The climate in all classrooms depicts a community of learners supporting and learning from each other.

Leadership, professional development, and commitment

Teachers and administrators point to two overriding factors that account for their students' successful performance: an individual, influential teacher and Reading Recovery. Approximately ten years ago, the teachers in Carlisle began to undertake real change. One energetic and inspiring colleague, Debbie, was trained as a Reading Recovery teacher during the 1991–93 time frame. She influenced her colleagues, modeled strategies, took her teammates along to conferences, and shared her enthusiasm for a methodology she believed really made a difference for individual children. Her colleagues, in turn, took "supportive classroom" and "guided reading" courses. The Reading Recovery teacher's training strongly influences the practices that primary teachers implement, and more subtly guides the direction for teachers of grades 3–4.

The faculty recognize that these approaches have allowed them to "know the knower" or to teach responsively to individual children. In addition, they argue that this approach has influenced student performance because of the consistent instruction that has resulted. They believe it is critical that the children are using the same strategies, same terms, and same language throughout their primary grade experience.

At Carlisle, the size of the school and staff has definitely influenced how decisions are made regarding practice. The three primary grade teachers usually eat lunch together in one of their rooms, process the morning happenings, focus on individual children, and discuss "how things are going." In 1996, these ongoing, informal discussions led the teachers to propose a new model of instructional practice. They agreed that they all had "strengths and interests" from which perhaps the children could benefit. The "smallness" of the group involved and

FIGURE 2

Long-term commitment to literacy of successful vs. less-successful **Country schools, 1988-1998**

	CARLISLE	SOMMERS	*ELLIS**	VERMONT
1987-1988	**PRIN**** new principal	**WLANG** Wendy, primary grade teacher, attends whole language conference and is influenced by Don Holdaway	***	**COMM; PFS**
1988-1989				**PSA; RR**
1989-1990				
1990-1991	**RR** district joins state sponsored Recovery Consortium	**UNIV** Wendy starts M.Ed. at The University of Vermont	Community Literacy Committee forms collaboration with Council of Humanities – still in operation in 1998; for budgetary reasons, management team leads school from 1990-1991 to 1994-1995	
1991-1992	**RR** Claire, grade 1 teacher, trained as Reading Recovery teacher	**RR** District joins state sponsored Reading Recovery Consortium		**PFS**
1992-1993				
1993-1994	**RR** K-2 teachers take course and training in guided reading and Reading Recovery	**RR; RR** Wendy trained as Reading Recovery teacher; K-2 teachers take courses on Reading Recovery in the classroom		**ROPA**
1994-1995				**VISMT; PFS**
1995-1996	**RR; PHAW** K-2 teachers change to Reading Recovery based instruction, considered a "work in progress"; teachers take courses in phonological awareness	**RR; VT DRA; SPELL** Wendy teaches early literacy to Sommers' teachers; K-2 teachers train/pilot statewide second grade literacy assessment; Sommers adopts Cast-A-Spell (isolated word study)	**PRIN; RR** new principal; K and Title I teachers train in CHEERS, a Reading Recovery program	**STDS**
1996-1997				**NSRE**
1997-1998	**ST** high scores on the VT DRA and NSRE statewide tests	**ST** high scores on the VT DRA and NSRE statewide tests	**SPELL** school adopts Cast-A-Spell, an isolated word study of spelling with white boards	**VT DRA**

Ellis* is the less-successful school. ***Abbreviations identify the nature of continuous development within the school or school district. **Abbreviation descriptions can be found on page 114. ****Solid lines* indicate the duration of continuous development within the school or school district; *dashed lines* indicate the absence of continuous development.

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the type of ongoing communication they had with their principal allowed for this type of change to be implemented. Debbie is the reading specialist for K–2 and her classroom is devoted to ongoing and engaging literacy interactions; another teacher, Carol, teaches science and health and works with first and second graders each afternoon in guided reading groups; and the third, Patricia, is the math and writing expert.

The 3–4 team of two also works together closely and makes decisions in a similar manner. These teachers continually evaluate and "tinker" with the current systems and programs in a constant quest to make learning "work" for the children. They also remark on the principal's ongoing support "to allow us to do what we need to do." It should be noted that Gerald, the principal, has been a part of the school and its journey since 1988–89. One of the staff, Debbie, believes that "teachers have set the initiative for what they want to learn in the building and he has been very supportive of that."

One overriding commitment is very clear. The staff and administration are dedicated to exposing children to quality literature and giving time to the act of reading. One way they have achieved this goal is through the America Reads program. In preparation of the 1998–99 school year, senior citizen volunteers from the organization RSVP teamed up with America Reads and Debbie, the Reading Recovery teacher and K–2 reading teacher, for "extra" training. The school atmosphere is one of both children and adults committed to and enjoying books.

School community

The teachers in Carlisle have truly remarkable relationships with each other. Although their individual classrooms and styles can look quite different, their shared vision and respect for each other as professionals is evident. There is a very lively, collegial nature to their communication. Gerald, the principal, shares how the K–2 teachers come together at lunch time to talk: "I won't even say that it's always focused talk; I mean sometimes they're just talking about issues and something will come up and they'll share ideas, then it shoots off to a brainstorming session." However, this is the kind of conversation that led to the decision of the K–2 teachers to "teach to their strengths." He also distinguishes one of the teachers, Debbie (the Reading Recovery and literacy expert), as a "very, very strong advocate for the whole literacy program; she's very, very committed to it, it's kind of always a focus in her mind."

The teachers themselves articulate the strengths and productivity of their school community. Patty, a K-2 teacher notes that she

believe[s] that our staff is very open to things that are working and very willing to share with each other; everybody pitches in. If somebody comes across something they think would be useful for us, a workshop or some sort of materials, they are more than willing to pass it on.

Carol, another K–2 teacher and the science and health expert, recently took a course on the development of phonological awareness among young children. This course was taught from a somewhat different philosophical stance than the one typified by teachers in her school, but that did not stop her from learning, nor did it stop others from taking advantage of her newly acquired information. These teachers are focused on improving instruction for individuals and they

share new information and construct new teaching strategies through informal and formal dialogues with each other. Julie also emphasizes the role the classroom assistants play in the success of their program:

There is a big part of our program that would die without our classroom—individual aides; let's clarify that, they're individual aides, they're hired to be with one particular student, but we're really fortunate in having some incredible, incredible assistants teaching multi-task at one point . . . and our special education coordinator's pretty comfortable in letting us direct her schedule with what our needs are, and Valarie (the Title I teacher) is great!

Conclusions about Carlisle Elementary School

In this rural and poor Country school, children are fortunate to have teachers who believe in the value and act of reading. Their authentic practice has been building over time as a result of stable leadership, their desire for and commitment to professional growth, and their mutual respect and camaraderie.

Within the individual classroom walls, this school is a unique learning environment and culture. The factors that the study singles out as imperative for "success" exist to some degree in each classroom: vision and commitment to literacy learning, coherence of approach, well-managed and paced instruction, and communication among faculty and administration. It is the combination and interplay of these factors that control the ultimate outcome. The manner in which they exist and interrelate are subtle, but real, and they are implemented thoughtfully.

Sommers Elementary School

Sommers School, the other Country school in our study, sits on a rise above a tiny village approximately 15 miles from a small state college and its surrounding town. Approaching the town from a long, winding dirt road, one can see the white steeple of the church. There are no stores, filling stations, or other businesses. What stands out are the farms—lots of them—and small houses, some well-kept, others not.

Sommers, like Carlisle, is small. Its school population of 160 in grades K–8 is distributed among the following classrooms:

- **two half-day kindergarten sessions**
- **one grade 1 classroom**
- **one grade 2 classroom**
- **one grade 3 classroom**
- **one grade 4 classroom**

Like their counterparts in this cluster, the town of Sommers is poor and its residents are poorly educated. More than 23% of the people do not have high school diplomas, and about 14% of those have less than a ninth- grade education. Only 17% of the adults have attained any education beyond the high school level. 57% of the school's student population qualifies for free and reduced-cost lunch. Teacher salaries, too, typify the socio-economic portrait of the Country cluster, with an average salary in 1999 of $29,583, approximately

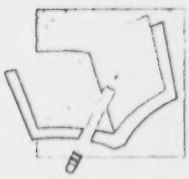
$11,000 less than the $41,476 average salary of teachers in Uptown schools. Not surprisingly, few professionals reside in this community. In the words of one of the teachers, these are "people who are laborers, loggers, seasonal workers and farmers." The families do have strong roots in the community however, and teachers report little transience.

The boundaries between school, community, and family are somewhat difficult to distinguish within this remote and very small school. As the principal remarked, "The teachers see the school as an extension of themselves, their families. They have a strong sense of ownership about this school." Indeed, some teachers are teaching children who are offspring of previous students. One teacher noted that she believes the community has been generally supportive (even when they don't completely understand changes in the school) because "they can see cars in the parking lot on weekends and know that teachers work hard."

Although the class sizes are small (on average, 13 pupils per grade level in grades 1–4), teachers do work very hard. There are very few "specials" (instructors for physical education, art, music, and so on) and few, if any, breaks in the day. Lunch duty, playground duty, and even shoveling snow are still facts of life. In Sommers, teachers have half an hour a week for planning time. In short, the teachers are respected. The last day of the school year is always scheduled to be a Saturday so that the school can have a half-day of school followed by a community picnic.

Knowledge, expertise, and opportunity to read

One's first impression of Sommers' literacy program is that of engaged, public, interdisciplinary work. During one visit, field notes describe the

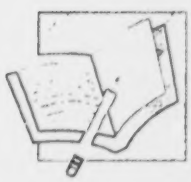


beautiful artwork everywhere, much of it linked to curriculum (i.e., bird studies, paintings of folk art symbols, etc.). The commitment to reading is everywhere! Outside the 1st grade is a display of age-appropriate authors, with short bios and photos. Outside the 2nd grade classroom is documentation explaining Guided Reading as the "Heart of a Balanced Literacy Program." Grade 3 displays neatly typed reports and posters related to earthquakes, volcanoes, tidal waves, etc., and finally multi-media story maps are displayed outside grade 4.

The effort to teach the rural poor

Teachers devote large amounts of time to literacy (approximately 90 to 120 minutes per day). During these periods, children read a great deal. Children in grade K–2 read with the teacher each day for periods totalling up to 25 minutes. Among children in grades 3–4, most read for at least 30 minutes each day. There are also silent reading times each day and a daily read-aloud time.

All teachers at Sommers implement the "block" of literacy time and use it for the purpose of engaging with text. Field notes describe how all teachers

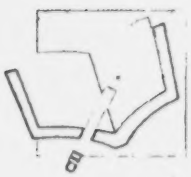


mention the value and priority of read-aloud; they all seem to have a clear provision for some reading practice (whether paired or silent); they maintain individualized book lists for each child (passed along from grades 1-3); and Anne, the 4th grade teacher, does book groups and self-selected reading, and talks about choice and ownership [with her students].

As in Carlisle, management of these routines is exemplary with no noticeable off-task behavior recorded in field notes. The classroom environments look informal, but the teachers and children are very workmanlike. Hardly any time is taken with transitions or behavior management. Although there are some challenging children in these classrooms, the teachers are highly skilled, and the use of para-educators and special education assistants provides additional support. Consequently, almost all of the allocated time for literacy ends up being engaged time.

The New Zealand connection

The primary teachers have been strongly influenced by New Zealand models. Field notes describe:



Teachers across all K–3 classrooms implement the guided reading approach (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) with great fidelity. They meet with small, flexible groups, using individual titles and sets of books that have been leveled according to Reading Recovery standards (1–20) for younger readers and the text gradient system of Fountas and Pinnel (Guided Reading) for somewhat older readers.

The third and fourth grades use trade books such as *Stone Fox, Marvin Redpost, Ramona, The BFG, Bridge to Terabithia,* and *Enormous Egg.* Children have access to many books: within their classrooms, from the 7,000 volume library collection, and from the common "book room" for all leveled texts. Explicit teaching of skills accompanies this infusion of literature. Field notes describe teachers "referring to well-used word walls, conducting Cast-a-Spell lessons, attending to word patterns, and decoding strategies during guided reading." Although teachers take skills instruction seriously, they embed it in literature and offer it somewhat opportunistically.

Teachers also take ongoing assessment very seriously. They use the observation survey for all children and maintain weekly running records. As one first-grade teacher remarked, "The use of running records allows me to observe and identify behaviors each child is using. I plan instruction based on these changing observations." Finally, Reading Recovery provides essential services to individual children and defines the types of classroom practices employed by teachers. Title I and special education professionals are also available to supplement the work of the half-time Reading Recovery teacher, who is also a half-time classroom teacher.

Betty, one of the primary teachers, provides the cautionary note that the effort to engage these children of the rural poor goes beyond what the teachers can provide in the classroom:

We can't do it all, so home support is a key element, and some people have more of that key element than other children do and we need to find other times and those other children stay at school to provide experiences that we would hope could be supported at home.

Leadership, professional development, and commitment

Sommers and Carlisle, "successful" schools in the Country cluster, followed remarkably similar paths as they began to undertake real change approximately ten years ago. (**See Figure 2**). In both schools, teachers and administrators point to two overriding factors that account for their students' successful performance: an individual, influential teacher and Reading Recovery.

In each school, one energetic and inspiring colleague was trained as a Reading Recovery teacher during the 1991–93 time frame. In Sommers, Wendy attended a whole language conference in 1988 and was influenced by Don Holdaway. She began working on her M. Ed. in 1990, and in 1993 she was trained as a Reading Recovery teacher. Thus began the influence she has to this day on her colleagues. She modeled strategies, took her teammates along to conferences, and shared her enthusiasm for methodology she believed made a difference for individual children. Her colleagues, in turn, took "supportive classroom" and "guided reading" courses, often taught by Wendy and sponsored by the school district. The Reading Recovery training strongly influences the practice of the primary team and more subtly guides the direction for teachers at grades 3–4. Carolyn, the third grade teacher, reflects the inspiration and enthusiasm that is infectious within Sommers in describing her return to teaching after a lengthy family hiatus: "I took a week-long whole language course. I was so inspired that week. I got so excited about teaching reading and also it inspired me to start reading myself." The faculty recognize that their approach to literacy has allowed them to "know the knower" or to teach responsively to individual children. In addition, they argue that this approach has influenced student performance because of the consistent instruction that has resulted. They believe that "it's critical that the children are using the same strategies, same terms and same language throughout their primary grade experience."

The teachers recognize the importance of the past principal in supporting the move to guided reading and whole language. Though that principal is no longer at Sommers, the curriculum coordinator from that time is—she is now the superintendent. Thus, the continuity of support and commitment to professional development that complements what has been implemented factors into the success of the Sommers' students on statewide literacy assessments. One of the

teachers commented that, "There has been a real [mutual] trust with the administration in the past, [their trust] that we do know what we're doing and we're doing a good job."

One teacher remarked that the current principal, Susan, has been helpful, and savvy, in the sense that she "supports and appreciates" what the teachers do. Another colleague's remark clearly exemplifies the knowledge, expertise, and commitment of this tiny staff: "I really think we would have done what we're doing regardless of who the administrator was unless they told us we couldn't."

The description above points to the ownership of change at Sommers, as at Carlisle. Change comes from extensive professional development. However, here it is of the homegrown variety, relying heavily on teacher mentoring and colleagueship. Individual teachers sought opportunities through participation in graduate programs, state-wide professional conferences, and TAWL (whole language) meetings. The larger professional development environment in Vermont from the late 1980s to 1990s was vibrant, and Sommers' teachers took advantage of that environment. The principal, Susan, said, "We have skilled and dedicated teachers, teachers who know what it is they're supposed to be doing—they know how to do it effectively—and who are committed to continuing to do that with each kid." The superintendent of the district commented that "They [the staff] are natural leaders, mentoring in the classroom. There is no weak link in the staff."

Carolyn describes the passion and competence the members of the staff feel towards their jobs:

It [successful test scores] probably had to do with first-grade instruction, setting high expectations for learning and making sure they are praised for the good things they do. And we expect them to live up to whatever those standards are.

Similarly, Anne, a fourth-grade teacher, remarks,

I think what I find best in this school [is that] I am not the sole owner of these test scores; that's the way it's approached in our school. Here at this school it's full ownership of the children.

School community

At Sommers, the teachers' "commitment to growing professionally" influences their respect for each other and their relationships. The current principal, Susan, remarks on the success of the school, "[There are] high-quality teachers, committed teachers, teachers who talk to each other." The teachers appear to genuinely value their teammates and the relationships that have been developed through their work together. One teacher remarks, "We have a wonderful team here, a very passionate group of teachers. People willing to work as a team. They're always working overtime." Carolyn shares how a colleague

inspired me a lot to continue learning and going to continuing ed things. And we are all moving in the same direction, and we were taking a lot of the same courses and doing a lot of the same work. We are a true team.

Summary of successful Country schools

The children and community of Sommers—poor, rural, remote—are very fortunate to have committed, knowledgeable, and hard-working teachers. The journey of this staff and administration is one that exemplifies how the proper configuration of leadership (in this case, from a teacher), vision, professional development, respect, camaraderie, and support (at multiple levels) can create a vibrant, literacy-rich, learning environment—one from which children, families, and teachers learn and grow.

The configuration of factors perhaps reflects one aspect of the cluster—its isolated, rural environment. Wendy and the teachers at Sommers might have been stymied in a larger environment with more points of view and a clientele more diverse in ability. In their rural environment they could do what they felt was needed. The union of whole language and Reading Recovery practices did not disintegrate in the whole language versus phonics war that many other schools in Vermont went through during the 1980s and early 1990s.

Sommers and Carlisle schools, unlike the Uptown schools, reveal very similar literacy programs based on Reading Recovery practices. Reading Recovery is a research-based program of instruction tailored to the needs of the at-risk primary grade student. Its practices and their adaptions by the Sommers and Carlisle teachers are well matched to the student clientele and the low socio-economic status, the rural environment, and the diminished literacy skills these children bring to school.

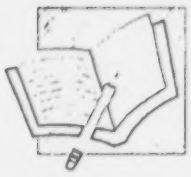
However, Reading Recovery was not developed as a school or classroom program. It is a clinical program relying on well-trained tutors working daily one-on-

one with students in first grade for up to 16 weeks. Though these practices have been adapted by researchers to classroom settings (for example, Pinnell & Fountas' work on guided reading), the acceptance and implementation of these principles of instruction at Sommers and Carlisle is due to the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of individuals within the faculty. In addition, given the very small size of the staff and student body, and the small class size, the teachers were able to tailor these practices in the most effective way for the students involved. Last, the faculty enjoys strong camaraderie—again, perhaps the result of a faculty cultivated over the years—and is a small enough group (five to six teachers) that issues of communication and variable commitment do not play a role.

Despite the cohesiveness of these schools, they, in their particular way, clearly depict the attributes of successful schools regardless of demographic status: opportunity for students to read, a tangible school community, high level of teacher knowledge and expertise, and a long-term commitment to improvement in the literacy growth of the school's children. That these attributes of the successful Country school—along with the school-specific program attributes—are real is abundantly clear when it is compared with the less successful school in the Country school cluster.

Contrast with a less-successful literacy environment: *Ellis Elementary School*

Although Ellis, the less-successful Country school, has consistent blocks of time set aside for literacy, the time is used differently throughout the grades. Some of the classrooms (mostly the upper elementary grades) are engaged in reading quality literature for significant periods of time. The primary grades, for the most part, are focused on word-level work for significant periods of time. In one primary grade classroom, as described in field notes, the students spend



18 minutes of a 90-minute language arts block reading text. The remainder of the time was spent on isolated skill/drill work associated with a newly purchased phonological awareness program that the 2–3 grade teachers are piloting. [A teacher noted that] "the focus of the majority of my reading time is the (isolated phonics) program; we supplement that program with trade books."

Although teachers in Ellis share their knowledge and expertise in many instances, the teachers do not articulate a shared commitment to what is best for their students. As is evident in the contrast between K–2 and 3–4 work, two philosophies are at work in the school. An approach such as Reading Recovery does not serve to unify faculty around the vision of all children learning. Donna talks passionately about the need

to read the research material; there has to be some way to base the decisions we make on sound information, not just what the current trend might be. You need to rely on your own knowledge of what works with kids.

Perhaps as a result of this uncertainty, the classroom instruction lacks the rigor and appearance of being on task that was noted at Carlisle and Sommers. Field notes from one classroom describe the following: "constant reminders to focus, an accusation of cheating, a child being ridiculed for not doing better." This type of management is not uncommon in Ellis's classrooms and provides a sharp contrast to the efficient, energized, and respectful relationships observed at the Carlisle and Sommers schools.

The contrast between Ellis's timeline of change and those of Sommers and Carlisle is staggering. (**See Figure 2**). There are huge gaps in the building leadership at Ellis due to turnover. In addition, or as a result, no leader from the ranks of the teachers emerged with the knowledge, belief, and vision that characterized Wendy at Sommers. In fact, the Ellis school board made the decision that the school would be run by a management committee. This committee was put into place in 1990 and lasted until 1996. Part of the committee consisted of a selected group of teachers who were given responsibility for curriculum and implementation. But without a vision of what the curriculum should be, these teachers and the committee as a whole had no purpose or mandate to address the learning of the school's children.

The demise of the management team led to a principal who stayed two years. The current principal, Dale, has added a degree of stability and direction that the staff desperately wants. Donna, a veteran primary grade teacher, notes how he "encourages the staff not to try to be doing a hundred different initiatives at the same time; he's kind of gotten us to back off and work with the things we're doing." The leadership vacuum may be responsible for the lack of coherent professional development over the past decade. This kind of incoherence is reflected in classroom practice. Even within the primary unit, teachers are using

approaches that are not linked or coordinated with work done in the surrounding grades. For example, one teacher utilizes an adaptation of guided reading while two others use an isolated phonics program as the core of their reading programs. Without the purposefulness of work across grades, communication among teachers and communities is not directed to children's learning but to other issues or, often, to the problems teachers are having with children's learning. This frustration is reflected in management issues observed in the classroom.

Interaction among teachers at Ellis lack coherence and coordination, and it tends to be based on conflict when frustrated teachers struggle to make effective decisions about the right thing to do. For example, one teacher notes:

I think there are teams that would like to pressure the other teams into using what they feel is best, like I would love to go and pressure the first grade to start using this program so I don't have to start at level one . . . and they'd love to pressure us.

Another colleague, as noted above, states:

people need more background information [when choosing a program to implement]. I think the [isolated phonics] program was chosen because one person, one professional said—oh yeah, that would be good for your class and I don't think that's the way to choose a program. I think that you need to research a lot of things that are available, you need to look at current research . . . There has to be some way to base the decisions we make on sound information, not just what the current trend is.

The contrast between Carlisle and Sommers—the successful schools—and Ellis is stark. Revolving leadership at the principal level, antagonism among teachers, and idiosyncratic programs provide some of the causes. There is no synergy.

Lessons from the Country schools

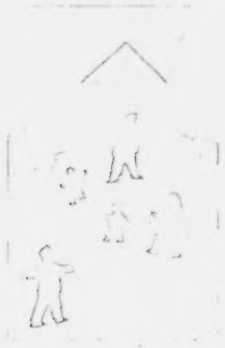
Although the Country schools serve a relatively homogeneous community, the literacy strengths of the students entering the school are undeveloped. The families of the Carlisle and Sommers communities are primarily poor and Anglo. Importantly, these schools reside happily in their communities and the teachers share community norms because they have been longtime teachers at the schools. The shared history and background of the children, teachers, and school community help to prevent the kind of gatekeeping that occurs when teachers and students do not share cultural norms. This characteristic of the Country schools is directly analogous to the common cultural norms operative in the Uptown Schools.

It is important to note that the strengths of the Sommers and Carlisle environments develop from the foundation of a "homegrown" approach to the needs of the children at these schools. The teachers made it happen and could do so because of their cohesiveness, which is related to the small number of teachers and students at the schools. As all the successful schools made choices in the context of their situations, so the Country schools made choices that capitalized on the characteristics of their situation—in particular, their smallness.

However, as the example of Ellis Elementary School shows, smallness in a rural context is not a sufficient reason for success. The attributes of opportunity, expertise, community, and commitment interact as a complex of forces to determine

success. At Ellis, conflicting approaches, expertise undeveloped over the years, tension between faculty and community, and turnover in administrative leadership led to a school environment that did not foster children's learning.

Unlike the larger schools, Sommers and Carlisle did reach agreement on a focused, responsive approach to literacy instruction through the principles of Reading Recovery. Their choice—and the way it was made and cultivated—is one that could be made in the situation of a Country school.



Successful "Main Street" Schools: Baxter and Elwood

Overview of the Main Street cluster of schools

Though larger than the Country schools, the Main Street schools remain small[1]. Baxter and Elwood are typical of small towns in Vermont, and the one elementary school in each place carries the town name. Like many of the Main Street communities, these towns are composed of small centers of business surrounded by rural areas. The town dwellings are almost entirely single-family homes. Both Main Street schools house K-6 classrooms and a veteran and well-educated faculty. Most teachers at both schools have a master's degree; several of these are in reading and language arts. Many of the most veteran teachers received their master's degrees more than a decade ago, although many have more current coursework as well. The experience of the teachers has influenced the course of events at both schools.

[1] The terms "Country," "Main Street," and "Uptown" are fictionalized names that are designed to help the reader characterize the nature of these clusters in the broadest terms. Within each cluster there is considerable variability and, inevitably, at least some schools seem to be a poor fit to the primary cluster attributes. School names and names of persons are also fictionalized, with no significance attached to their pseudonyms.

Baxter Elementary School

In Baxter, the school sits in the center of a small village, next door to the town hall which serves as the gymnasium and also houses the lunch room. The town library is housed in the Baxter School. The center of town also includes a white-steepled church, a local market, and a village green with several houses clustered around it. Just outside of the village center are several small businesses, including a feed and grain facility and a farm equipment business. The town has easy access to a busy state highway that connects it to larger communities 30-45 minutes away.

About one-third of the adults have a high school diploma, another 18% have a college degree, and fewer than 10% have any graduate or professional degrees. However, almost 20% of the adults in Baxter do not have a high school diploma. Approximately one-quarter of the students are eligible for free and reduced-cost lunch. The poverty index for Baxter is almost exactly equal to the average for the Main Street schools cluster (12.7%). In short, Baxter is a small town with a diverse population of largely middle class folks.

Baxter has a school population of 167 in grades K-6. The average class size at Baxter is 16, and the students we studied are distributed among the following classrooms:

- **one kindergarten classroom**
- **three grade 1-2 multi-age classrooms**
- **three grade 3-4 multi-age classrooms**

Baxter's success in realizing high levels of student achievement in reading and writing is relatively recent. Although the school and its faculty had enjoyed having an "image as an incredible school, its test scores were not good," according to a previous principal, Susan. The school's strong public image appears to have been related to the perceived excellence of the teachers. According to Susan, there was relatively little concern about performance on standardized measures because until the late 1980s, there was a perception that the "test scores didn't mean anything."

Baxter's teachers had, and continue to demonstrate, a deep commitment to books and to reading. Interestingly, many of the teachers have a liberal arts background, not an educational one (four of the six teachers in grades K-4 have undergraduate degrees in English). Several of the teachers had been trained in individualized reading and the use of student conferences as the backbone of a literature-based reading program.

During the late 1980s, there were several changes in the leadership of the school district of which Baxter school is a part. A new superintendent, Joe, came to the district, joined shortly thereafter by a new school principal, Susan. They talked about the alignment of tests and curriculum, and began to ask questions about how to help students achieve. In addition, they were asking difficult questions about teacher responsibility for all students, including those receiving services from special education and Title 1. This administrative-level attention, the "glaringly" weak reading scores, and an ensuing battle among primary faculty about "whole language" versus "phonics" (principal interview with Susan), made this a very challenging time, but it also signaled a shift in attention. The present superintendent, Scott, described the considerable change over the past decade at this school:

They've historically (although [it] has changed) had the highest per pupil cost in the district. At that point they were also in our district the lowest performing school of the elementary schools and that has begun to change within the last four years when there really has been an emphasis on academic performance.

Teachers in this building had always taken course work and had remained very active professionally, but as Susan pointed out, they had not identified "any needs as a group." For the first time, in 1988-1990, the staff began to do coursework together, attending school- and district-sponsored classes, workshops, and summer institutes.

Knowledge, expertise, and opportunity to read

Baxter is relatively small for a Main Street school, with just 167 students K–6. Baxter's classrooms are all multi-age, with three teachers for grades 1–2 and three teachers for grades 3–4 (and two teachers for grades 5–6, which are not a part of this study). There are two sessions of self-contained kindergarten at Baxter with approximately twelve children in each session. A cadre of full-time paraeducators is also in the building and is central to the success of the literacy program. They have been in the schools for a very long time.

Baxter's eclecticism

At Baxter, teachers consistently indicate that they did *not* employ one particular approach or method. Virtually all teachers used some language suggesting that they are *eclectic*:

Monica, Multi-age 1–2: *"I feel that the eclectic approach is the best. We try to take the best of everything from everywhere and anywhere that we can get it."*

Barbara, Multi-age 3–4: *"I use a number of different sorts of methods for teaching reading."*

Sandra, Multi-age 3–4: *"Reading has a lot of different faces and it happens several different times throughout every day of the week. So I would say there isn't just one way I teach reading..."*

Consistent with this view, teachers draw from a wide variety of materials including commercial programs, such as Rigby's Storybox Books, other leveled "little books" (controlled vocabulary books), and children's trade books. None of the teachers at Baxter uses a packaged reading program. Basal readers are not a part of Baxter teachers' eclecticism.

However, the primary teachers do draw on methodologies that they have acquired (for example, individualized, self-selected reading, guided reading, word walls, phonological awareness training, and so on). One teacher uses a highly-structured program recommended for teaching phonological awareness and phonics, while another uses word walls, word sorts, and individual conferences to teach word recognition. Although the specific instructional strategies vary from classroom to classroom, teachers in all three multi-age primary classrooms combine explicit instruction in word-level skills with extensive opportunities to practice reading in appropriately leveled texts. In addition, children write a great deal in these classrooms, using inventive (or developmental) spelling for early drafts and revising the drafts for publication.

There is a greater uniformity of practice among grade 3–4 teachers, although these teachers also draw from many sources. These teachers use literature-based discussion as their primary method. Students read either self-selected trade books or assigned group novels and meet to discuss their readings. Generally, students are asked to respond to the literature in writing. Some teachers have highly developed packets to accompany the reading, while others use response journals with articulated criteria. The genesis for this work was the literature-based, self-selected, individualized reading of the 1970s, not the book clubs of the 1990s. Teachers in both buildings mention coursework taken with Lyman, an education professor at the University of Vermont during the 1970s and early 1980s and a leading reading educator within the state. He was an early advocate of literature-based reading programs and is considered the father of sustained silent reading.

Eclectic opportunity at Baxter

While this eclecticism is characteristic of the school, there are a number of unifying practices as well. For example, there are books everywhere in Baxter. (**See Table 1**). Most classrooms have hundreds or as many as a thousand books. These books are often beautifully displayed and are generally accessible to students. They include, but are not limited to, the types of little leveled books designed for instructional purposes. Most are high-quality literature—picture books and novels. Not only are the books available to children, but teachers read aloud daily. Teachers throughout the building echo the sentiments of Barbara (multi-age teacher of grades 3–4): "[There is a] significant commitment in this school to reading and literacy. There are "books in kids' hands."

Given the influence of Lyman, it is not surprising that both successful Main Street schools rely on sustained silent reading time, which provides extensive opportu-

nities for students to read a great deal in their classrooms. At Baxter, the students engage in DEAR (**D**rop **E**verything **A**nd **R**ead). Importantly, the students in these buildings spend time on reading and writing during literacy time. They read books, write about and discuss books, are involved in word work, write in journals, or write other original pieces. During our observations, time was not spent on management, and students did not spend time on other activities, such as math sheets, art work, or time-consuming projects. These things happened at other times in the day.

The intentional use of time for literacy did not happen by chance at Baxter. When the school restructured and created block scheduling for literacy, they also brought paraeducators, called "collaborative partners," into that time period. The idea was to "push in" the services needed to teach reading and writing and this block was to be "inviolate"—no announcements, no interruptions of any sort. The block scheduling with collaborative partners had been in place for six years when we studied the school, and although there have been some changes due to budget cuts, it still functions largely as it was originally intended. Every teacher credits this block scheduling and the highly-skilled paraeducators with having a major impact on student performance.

It is interesting that Baxter supports its paraeducators with local money. Although Baxter is a Title I school, it would not be able to fund four full-time para-educators with Title I funds. Instead, it funds a full-time Title I reading teacher and supplements the additional budget with local dollars. This commitment to the school by the local school board was also cited as one influence on student performance.

Leadership, professional development, and commitment

Baxter is a particularly interesting school because it resides in a school district of five schools, four of which met our criteria as "first-tier" schools (schools with greater than 80% of the second- and fourth-grade students scoring above the grade level standard on the second-grade Vermont Developmental Reading Assessment and the fourth-grade New Standards Reference Examination in reading). It is not surprising that the supervisory union itself is named as influential by teachers and by school-level administrators. Although this district has experienced considerable turnover in the district offices, it has attracted an unusually talented group of curriculum experts and administrators. (**See Figure 3**).

As the curriculum experts and administrators moved into the district in the mid-1980s, they began to ask questions such as "What are we doing?" and "Why are we doing it?" There was a clear goal: improve student learning. They sought and received money for restructuring; they brought the university to the district in the form of contract courses and school development institutes, they asked questions, and they began to make "major changes" concerning how students received services, how services were paid for, and how instructional staff was used. The district's curriculum director identified the current superintendent as very influential: "He's incredible, really having us focus in . . . . I really think that a deliberate focus on literacy came from him and through the district." These sentiments are echoed by Monica, a multi-age 1–2 teacher who has been in the district for 20 years:

We've been trying to focus in the district, as well as in the school, on literacy for awhile. We have a pretty nice reading and writing curriculum that [is] fairly integrated and I think we're getting a lot of early intervention with those kids, so kids aren't falling through the cracks as much as they used to.

FIGURE 3

Long-term commitment to literacy of successful vs. less-successful Main Street schools, 1988-1998

	BAXTER	ELWOOD	*NORTON**	VERMONT
1987-1988		**PSA** receives Public School Approval from the state	***	**COMM; PFS**
1988-1989	**PSA**** receives Public School Approval from the state			**PSA; RR**
1989-1990				
1990-1991	**LA** new Language Arts curriculum completed and implemented		**PRIN** new principal; literacy celebrated; teacher planning time developed schoolwide themes help school community; principal leaves and initiatives are not sustained	
1991-1992		**LA** new Language Arts curriculum completed and implemented		**PFS**
1992-1993				
1993-1994	**PRIN; RR** new principal with literacy background; teachers examine literacy instruction; adopt PIERS on Reading Recovery	**LIT; RR** K-3 literacy committee formed; teachers adopt PIERS strategies based on Reading Recovery		**ROPA**
1994-1995				**VISMT; PFS**
1995-1996	**LIT** high expectations intensify; literacy focus established at district level	**ASSM** high expectations intensify; Elwood teachers implement common assessments at each grade level; consistent record keeping begins	new principal but it is a "tough time . . . hell . . . everything went down the tubes"	**STDS**
1996-1997				**NSRE**
1997-1998	**ST** high scores on the VT DRA and NSRE statewide tests	**ST** high scores on the VT DRA and NSRE statewide tests	**PRIN; SUPT; LITC** new principal, superintendent, school board, and district literacy coordinator	**VT DRA**

Norton* is the less-successful school. ***Abbreviations identify the nature of continuous development within the school or school district. **Abbreviation descriptions can be found on page 114. ****Solid lines* indicate the duration of continuous development within the school or school district; *dashed lines* indicate the absence of continuous development.

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This district-wide focus and the channeling of resources toward literacy have clearly paid off for Baxter children. Over the past ten years, district resources and local support have resulted in an experienced and knowledgeable instructional team committed to school improvement. During our first visit to the school, the research team was welcomed with open arms; teacher after teacher remarked on how much they hoped to learn from their involvement and also indicated that they hoped we intended to give them feedback about what they could do to improve. This, despite the fact that they knew they had been identified as a successful school!

At Baxter, Susan, the previous principal notes that, although teachers were taking courses, the school had not established a need or a focus. Consequently, they did not necessarily move in the same direction. One of the first things Susan did, in 1988-1989, was to bring a year-long course on reading into the school. In recent years, the Baxter faculty has done two school development institutes together, creating a common reading list that they all discussed (for example, Dick Allington and Pat Cunningham's *Schools that Work*, and Cunningham's *Phonics They Use*). More recently, all of the primary faculty have taken a phonological development course. One teacher, Monica, notes that the training provided by the district and the focus of activity has been a factor in their success:

I think we've gotten more training over the last four-five years; some of which has been very, very strongly research-based, and I think that we're trying to put them into practice in the classroom. We have a lot of support for trying new things, which is wonderful.

As a result of these in-house professional development opportunities, several teachers have enrolled in graduate programs in literacy in recent years. However, the original genesis for the professional development was at the school level.

Although they do not all teach the same way, the teachers at Baxter do share a common set of understandings and a sense of mission that unites them. Teachers appear to have been supported in their eclectic approaches by careful attention to assessment and record keeping. The extensive amount of shared reading has made them articulate and provided a common basis for assessment. In addition, they have had time to talk to each other, and to understand and develop points of commonalty. The primary teachers and the 3–4 teachers (and also the 5–6 teachers) each spend one day a month off-site in team planning. Some of this mutual respect is newly acquired, but it is quite visible. Sara, a multi-age 1–2 teacher observed:

I think this past year and a half we've worked very well as a K–2 team and I think it's because we've learned to accept each others' differences and we all do teach very differently. The three of us as 1–2 teachers have very different styles, but because we've worked a great deal on developing assessments, we know that we're all working towards the same goal: this is what's important, it's what we're comfortable teaching. If it works for the kids in our classroom, then that's terrific. So, what we're teaching is more important than how we're teaching it.

Teachers have spent time agreeing on the skills and behaviors that will be evaluated during systematic and ongoing assessment. Every teacher knows what is expected of children at each grade level and they maintain records that are passed on to subsequent teachers.

School community

Baxter teachers have a great deal of professional autonomy and they frequently relate this to the supportive community. In Baxter, there is considerable socio-economic diversity. In a general way, the community is supportive and, of course, there are some highly-involved parents. Parent volunteers are not present in any significant numbers, but the office often has plates of homemade goodies sent by some parent. Every Monday morning, the entire school meets for an assembly in the town hall next to the school. At this assembly, one class at a time, from the youngest to the oldest, takes turns running the hour-long program. Parents often come for these Monday meetings, bringing younger siblings of the students. These collections of community members reflect the considerable range of economic wealth present in Main Street schools in Vermont. There are professional parents who work in the larger towns and cities half an hour away, there are parents who struggle to feed and clothe their children, and there are many families in between. The school building has a wonderfully "homey" feel to it, one that is intentionally cultivated and supported by the faculty.

More than the community itself, everyone in the school named the efforts and abilities of the teachers themselves as factors in student performance. As the current principal, Pam says, "[the teachers'] passion is with literacy." Similarly, the curriculum coordinator calls the teachers at Baxter "life-long learners" and adds, "There really is a sense at Baxter and across the district of professionals seeking better and better ways to help kids...I think we have a critical mass of people who really do believe that every kid can succeed."

The community of the teachers is complemented by the leadership of the principal. The role of the principal in Baxter's transformation is not lost on the teachers. Asked what impact the principal had on literacy instruction, Sara said,

"Pam's big focus when she came was really on consistency, on helping us realize that it's a team effort, that we need to work together to develop some consistency from grade to grade and class to class. She is the one, last year, who made us realize that it doesn't matter how each of us teach individually, it's that we're working towards the same goals and that we're focusing on the curriculum and we're focusing on helping kids."

Similarly, the superintendent noted that the "new" principal, Pam, was responsible for a changed environment for professional discourse. As he explained, "[Before there may have been good things happening and] there was a level of dialogue, but it tended to be social."

Conclusions about Baxter Elementary School

When the district superintendent was asked in 1997–1998 why Baxter School is so successful, he named three factors that are explanatory for Elwood as well: improved communication between teachers and grade levels so that individual teachers aren't operating so much by themselves, use of student assessment results, and maintenance of small class size (through the use of paraeducators). Although these are clearly not all of the factors that have influenced Baxter's success, they are also instrumental in Elwood's success, as we will see in the next section.

Elwood Elementary School

Elwood Elementary School is a typical Vermont Main Street school. The town's center of activity is the school, which hosts fall festivals and town celebrations. With 213 students (K–6), Elwood is larger than Baxter:

- **one kindergarten classroom**
- **two grade 1 classrooms**
- **two grade 2 classrooms**
- **two grade 3 classrooms**
- **two grade 4 classrooms**

Like Baxter, Elwood is a small town. Its population is somewhat less diverse than Baxter's in terms of socio-economic status. The poverty rate (7%) and the percentage of students receiving free and reduced-cost lunch (15%) are both lower than the Main Street average, attesting to the more uniformly middle-class status of this community. In Elwood, like Baxter, about one-third of the adults have a high school diploma, another 20% have a college degree, and fewer than 10% have any graduate or professional degrees. There are fewer adults in Elwood with no high school diploma (13% versus 19% for Baxter)—especially compared with the Country schools, where an average of 23% of adults do not have a high school diploma. Teachers' salaries, too, are in the middle of the range for schools in Vermont; the average teacher salary is $37,469 (FY 1997).

The parents of Elwood children have traditionally been slightly more affluent and well-educated than those at Baxter, and many parents commute to professional jobs in the nearby larger towns. Elwood has enjoyed a reputation as a "good" school for two decades. It serves as the center of activity for the town, and parents are deeply involved in and committed to the school's activities and to their students' achievement. Among K–3 faculty, the average number of years at this school is 19, with the total years of experience considerably higher than that. The recently-retired principal and the most veteran teachers began taking courses in reading in the 1970s. This early work laid the foundation for individualized reading, uninterrupted sustained silent reading, an engagement with books, and a confidence about reading instruction. Just a bit later, teachers became deeply involved in process writing approaches, and one of their fourth-grade teachers has been a strong leader in statewide writing networks from the earliest days. In contrast to Baxter, Elwood is a place with a history of success in the areas of reading and language arts.

Knowledge, expertise, and opportunity to read

The school and classroom configurations at Elwood differ from those at Baxter. Classrooms at Elwood are organized by grade-level groupings, with two teachers and classes at each grade level. At Baxter, aside from the kindergarten classrooms, all classrooms are either 1–2 or 3–4 multi-age. At both schools, however, there are two sessions of self-contained kindergarten, and there is also a cadre of full-time paraeducators in each building who have been in the schools for a very long time.

Elwood's eclecticism

The most consistent and striking finding regarding literacy programming at both schools is the extent to which teachers indicated that they did *not* employ one particular approach or method. At Baxter, virtually all teachers used some language suggesting that they are eclectic. Although the teachers at Elwood do not use the language of eclecticism to describe their practice, it is, nevertheless, a characteristic of their practice. Reading and writing practices vary by classroom, especially at the earliest levels. The teachers talk about having the freedom to make decisions about curricular materials and approaches, to "use whatever is best for kids." Unlike Baxter, that includes the use of commercial basal programs. At Elwood, the first grade teachers (only) have adopted a new basal program, but the two teachers continue to teach quite differently. One teacher uses a more structured skills approach and the other uses a more guided reading approach with predictable books. However, each uses a wide range of materials and appears to have picked up a little of the other's approach. The second grade teachers use a variety of materials and approaches, including leveled little books, trade books, and a dated basal program. In both first and second grades, teachers use ability grouping and guided reading. There is a much heavier reliance on commercial programs overall in Elwood than there is at Baxter. For example, to address concerns about word recognition and spelling, teachers in Elwood use a variety of commercial programs, such as *Cast-a-Spell, Explode the Code,* and *Wordly Wise.*

There is a greater uniformity of practice among teachers in grades 3–4 in both buildings, although they, too, draw from many sources. Like the teachers at Baxter, Elwood teachers use a literature-based discussion approach as their primary method. Sometimes students read self-selected trade books, while at other

times they are assigned to groups to read and discuss a common novel. Like the Baxter teachers, the philosophical roots of the Elwood teachers are related to graduate work they did in the 1970s, not the literature groups or whole language movement of the 1990s.

Eclectic opportunity at Elwood

Although the wide range of specific instructional practices at both Main Street schools are highly visible, the schools also share an underlying set of values and practices. The staff of both schools are committed to creating large blocks of time during which students read connected text. (**See Table 1**). As already noted in discussing Baxter Schools, there are literally hundreds of books in every classroom. At Elwood, these accessible books are often used by teachers and students during uninterrupted sustained silent reading.

Unlike at Baxter, teachers at Elwood do not use a block schedule. They do, however, make extensive use of paraeducators. There are six full-time instructional assistants in the K–4 classrooms, and five of the six have a long history with the school. Two have been there for 21 years; three others have been there 18, 16, and 14 years respectively. As with the Baxter teachers, the teachers of Elwood point to these paraeducators as central to their success. Importantly, the paraeducators at both buildings are included in all significant professional development. They participate in training and are paid to attend.

It is interesting that both schools support these paraeducators with local money. Although Elwood does not presently qualify for Title I money, over the past five years the district has been willing to fund the instructional assistants and the reading teacher using local funds. This commitment to the schools by the local school boards was also cited as one influence on student performance.

Leadership, professional development, and commitment

The teachers in these buildings are experienced and knowledgeable and have a lifelong commitment to professional development. As we noted earlier, the faculty of Elwood and their recently-retired principal began professional development in literacy very seriously, starting in the late 1970s. (**See Figure 3**). A striking feature of the two Main Street schools is the extent to which both went out and brought professional experiences into the building, via district or local resources. At Baxter, the vision initially grew out of district-level leadership. The leadership at Elwood has been largely local.

Teachers at Elwood attribute considerable influence to longtime principal Lesley, who led a group of teachers to take courses in the 1970s and then, when she became principal of Elwood, continued to be very involved in literacy. She took courses herself, recommended them to her teachers, and went with them to others. Teachers talk about her graduate degree in reading and language arts, the fact that she was perceived as a reading expert, and her involvement at the state level. Both second grade teachers as well as Lesley have M.Ed. degrees in reading and language arts. Several other teachers at Elwood have 40-60 credits beyond the bachelors degree, without a master's. As Penny, who has 60 credits beyond the bachelor's, says:

I debated various times about going for my master's and each time I've checked into a program and looked at the kinds of requirements, I'm not really sure they would make me do a better job. I found that this way I can really focus on the courses that are relevant to what I'm teaching.

Teachers also describe how Lesley supported them through the years. She encouraged them to use varied materials and approaches as long as the children continued to make progress in their reading and writing. During the 1980s, experts were brought into the district to provide in-service training in process writing and book talks. As we have already noted, these teachers had an established sense of confidence about their teaching. However, under Lesley's leadership, they also reexamined their practices. According to Lesley, "About five years ago (1992–1993), we decided we really needed to get the language arts program totally organized."

Starting in 1992, the school began to explore the reading strategies suggested by Marie, hired a Reading Recovery teacher in the building, and engaged in professional development related to acquiring knowledge and skill in early literacy. The introduction of the PIERS strategies (an overview introduction to Reading Recovery techniques) was a result of this work. They also began to address assessment issues (see below). Almost all of this professional development was provided at the school by one of the state's leading literacy experts (a member of the community). In conjunction with this staff development work, a K–3 literacy committee was created. These strategies created a strong "internal community," but it was one that was somewhat isolated from the rest of the school district. It appears that there is an interest on the part of the district to more fully integrate this building into the district. During our year in the building, a brand new principal and a new curriculum coordinator for the district were collaborating on literacy initiatives.

One particular area of work for both schools was assessment. Although they do not all teach the same way, the teachers in these two schools do share a common set of understandings and a sense of mission that unites them. At Baxter, the extensive amount of shared reading made them articulate while providing a

common basis for assessment. In addition, teachers had time to talk to each other, and to understand and develop points of commonalty. Similarly, when the Elwood teachers began to reconsider their instructional practices in the early 1990s, they agreed upon assessment strategies rather than instructional ones. As noted above, Lesley led an effort to organize the language arts program in 1992–1993:

There was an old phonics list that was developed. About three years ago we started detailed record keeping on kids. Records were then passed each year from teacher to teacher. I think that they (teachers) agree that it has paid off. Things worked well before and I think they're working even better now that we have true consistency.

Both schools have systematized assessment and record keeping, specifying the frequency of certain common assessment tools. Indeed, it appears that using assessment in this way has allowed these two buildings with strong and diverse faculties to create a reasonable amount of curricular coherence while maintaining the treasured autonomy of the teachers.

In both schools, teachers appear to have been supported in their eclectic approaches by building leadership that capitalized on the individual strengths of the faculty. Consistency or coherence was achieved, in part, through careful attention to assessment and record keeping.

School community

Teachers in both schools made one point strongly. Teachers at Elwood remarked, "We've always been allowed to use what we think are best practices and have not been forced to jump on any bandwagon" (Cathy). With such experienced and knowledgeable faculty, that autonomy appears to be a critical factor in their ongoing and newly-won successes. In addition, teachers and administrators have noted the importance of the community in which "good kids" and supportive families with high expectations facilitate the work of the teachers. Both schools benefit, in different ways, from the larger context within which they live. Both schools have enjoyed ongoing support from their school boards.

At Elwood, with its somewhat more affluent families, the teachers talk about the high level of parent support they feel. They talk about "good kids" and home environments where parents read to their children and provide rich experiences. There is a positive home-school connection, and teachers are perceived by the community as doing a good job. At Elwood, the teachers have been there for an average of 17 years (ranging from 4 to 28 years). The longtime principal of this building is highly regarded and appears to have established a sense of trust as well.

Summary of successful Main Street schools

The stories of these Main Street schools point to several ideas worth remembering, and themes that are observable throughout our clusters. Despite their eclecticism and their willingness to tolerate considerable variation among classrooms, these schools share many common attributes. These are schools with a longtime focus on literacy. They contain experienced and knowledgeable teachers (**expertise and commitment**) who are all committed to

- reading of continuous text (**opportunity**)
- literature and availability of books (**opportunity**)
- programs that include word recognition instruction as well as opportunity to read (**variety of approaches**)

At the same time, these teachers have created and currently use assessment systems that help develop consistency in the building among classrooms (**school community**). In addition, they have obtained the resources to develop and sustain a highly trained group of paraeducators who reduce class size and provide very good instruction. Finally, they have worked with a supportive and knowledgeable administration that has been willing to support and develop each teacher's expertise.

Contrast with a less-successful literacy environment: *Norton Elementary School*

In its own way, Norton, the less-successful Main Street school in this study, also demonstrates an eclectic approach to literacy instruction, but it lacks the success-

ful results. After a decade of turnover and lack of coherence in the literacy program, the primary grades starteded working with a basal series at the behest of the principal. Some of the teachers did not appreciate the move, others felt they were undersupported in its implementation (training and materials), and still others felt it was an end to what had been a decade of contentious instability and uncertainty about how to proceed with literacy instruction. The use of the basals has resulted in greater reading time as well as time spent on skill worksheets. The upper elementary grades do not follow a basal series, working primarily with chapter books, though they note that with repeated budget cuts they have not been able to purchase books to build their classroom libraries, including multiple copies of single texts. These teachers meet regularly with reading groups focusing on discussion of text. However, paraeducators are used without a clear purpose other than helping students with whatever they are working on at the time. Literacy time is shared with math time.

On the surface, Norton's eclecticism does not seem different from Elwood's and Baxter's. At a deeper level, it seems that staff are often implementing an approach by the numbers (use of the basal series) or by unexamined tradition (use of paraeducators), although the practices are not in synch with educators' personal beliefs about good teaching. Perhaps as a result, there is neither communication between grades nor a sense of common commitment to the goal of students' learning. Most important, there is no shared belief in cross-grade assessments—the glue of an eclectic school. With the common assessments, teachers work toward the same learning and performance goals. Without these common school standards, "eclectic" becomes "idiosyncratic."

At Norton, it is as if "eclectic" has given way to "fragmented" or "inconsistent." Some of this is evident in the opportunities for children to read. The primary

grades allocate 45 to 90 minutes to their literacy block, and within that time it is not unusual for children to be reading silently for 20 minutes. However, it is also not unusual in some classrooms for children in reading groups to spend the time working on skill pages in the basal workbook. In the upper elementary grades, there is a longer time block for literacy (90 to 105 minutes) but it is shared with math. The time spent on literacy varied on a daily basis. Field visits revealed regular silent reading times of 20 minutes. Because of budget cuts, the average number of books per classroom (300) is significantly less than the average size of the classroom libraries at Elwood and Baxter (560).

This portrayal of Norton is perhaps overly negative relative to the descriptions of Elwood and Baxter. In truth, a number of recent significant changes have been made (since 1996), beginning with building level and district leadership changes and the subsequent move to anchor the primary curriculum in a basal program. Most of what was observed and what was articulated by the teachers pertained to what was happening *now* (that is, 1996–1998). Thus, it is more accurate to say that Norton is in a comprehensive state of change and it feels, and looks, unconnected and uncertain. However, given the changes, the teachers are unified in their belief that they are changing for the better, and that much of the change is being directed by the new administrative leadership. With great hopefulness, the teachers see themselves improving as a school and progressing toward becoming a successful school.

Norton's timeline says it all. From 1987–1998 the school experienced no stable leadership. A concern for literacy surfaced in 1990, but within a year it was gone with the personnel responsible for its surfacing. The time of the new building principal in 1995 is remembered by different teachers as a "tough time," "hell," and " [when] everything went down the tubes." Most telling is the fact that

these events and recollections are the only details teachers related. No other information is readily recalled and the dearth of rich details about professional development, shared initiatives, or common commitments is strikingly absent from the interviews. It is as if there was no shared history among staff and administration, unlike in the successful schools where data on the school's "story" over the past decade was abundant and without conflicting accounts.

Successful schools are schools in which expertise, knowledge, opportunity to read, curricular program, leadership, commitment, and community mutually define each other. The story of a school is organic or inductive. Successful schools are not mandated, mechanical, deduced institutions. They are fragile, in need of constant maintenance and cultivation.

It is probable that the relationship between the school and the community is also mutually influential, and bi-directional. Norton's community is perceived in a less-flattering way than is Elwood's or Baxter's. Conflicts with the school board were noted. As for the parents, one teacher notes:

[Parents'] assumption is that [schooling and teaching] doesn't take much effort. They want the kids to be happy. They want their kids to have good report cards but in terms of what gets behind the underlying report of what an "A" means in terms of rubrics, in terms of competencies, and in terms of skills—they're not there.

Another states:

I don't think Norton is any different than any other community. There are lots of drugs. There are lots of dysfunctional families. There are lots of emotional issues . . . [Kids] come with a lot of needs and those needs affect their academics. Until you take care of those needs, I'm not sure how much of that is school responsibility, but we do work with it.

Of interest is the readiness of the Norton teachers to blame the school's lack of success on the community. In contrast, Elwood credits the "good kids" and good families of their communities. While Baxter's community is more diverse and parents less able to provide the kinds of support that Elwood parents do, the Baxter faculty have a more optimistic and benign view of the community and point to their consistent economic support of special programs. In other words, many schools attribute their success or failure to the community. However, it seems probable that this perception is more debilitating for low-performing schools, for it can excuse what is not happening in classrooms. In successful schools, teachers are more likely to credit their own hard work if the community is less than ideally equipped to support literacy development (see for example, Sommers School in the Country cluster).

Lessons from the Main Street Schools

The major themes of the larger study are evident in these Main Street schools. But these schools are also different from schools in the other clusters. This cluster is a large one, and there may be many other stories among the schools we did not study. However, there are some things worth noting that seem uniquely "Main Street." These schools are bigger than Country schools—big enough to need to consider the issue of coherence and consistency. On the other hand, they are smaller than Uptown schools—small enough to invite, or at least capitalize on, individual and personalized approaches to teaching. The teachers in these successful schools have a great deal of autonomy and they respond to it with an eclecticism that is quite visible. They clearly see this autonomy as a factor in their students' very high levels of literacy achievement and performance. However, it does not appear that this is necessarily a *recipe* for success. Indeed, the less-successful Main Street school was not able to harness teacher autonomy sufficiently to create the requisite quality across classrooms, nor were children experiencing a coherent program to become accomplished.

In all three buildings, the teachers were experienced. In the successful schools, these teachers contributed to the high regard that the communities had for their schools. Although the teachers in the less-successful school were also quite experienced, longevity was no panacea. The successful schools had achieved stability by virtue of strong leadership and extensive professional development at either the district or the local level. Importantly, this leadership seemed to understand that a veteran and confident faculty required special handling, and therefore that leadership was not exercised as an authoritarian imposition of policy. Rather, educational leaders in these buildings tried to honor the experience and caring of long-time teachers as they were encouraged or even required to move in new directions. Collegial conversations, common readings and courses, and

time to develop and plan seem essential to the ongoing professional renewal of both Baxter and Elwood. In other words, autonomy, individual variation, and eclectic methods were tolerated (even celebrated), as long as everyone agreed on the common ground that laid the foundation for these differences.

Successful "Uptown" Schools: South Creek and Naples

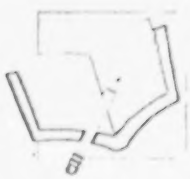
Overview of the Uptown cluster of schools

South Creek and Naples are both members of our Uptown School[1] cluster, representing approximately 16% of all the schools in Vermont. As is true for all schools in this cluster, South Creek and Naples are a bit larger and have more resources than other kinds of schools in the state. South Creek has 290 students K–5, and Naples has 300 students K–6. South Creek Elementary School is located in a thriving village in a four-season resort area. The school is in an older building with evidence of multiple additions and renovations over the years. It is within walking distance of the many shops and community recreation areas. Naples is adjacent to a densely-populated college town and urban center. Its newly renovated 100-year-old building is surrounded by woods, the village green, town offices, and the requisite country store.

Similar to the other schools in this cluster, the residents of South Creek and Naples have education and income levels that exceed the state average. Consistent with the cluster, 89% of the residents of Naples have advanced education beyond a high school diploma, 12.6 % have just a high school diploma, and 8.7%

[1] The terms "Country," "Main Street," and "Uptown" are fictionalized names that are designed to help the reader characterize the nature of these clusters in the broadest terms. Within each cluster there is considerable variability and, inevitably, at least some schools seem to be a poor fit to the primary cluster attributes. School names and names of persons are also fictionalized, with no significance attached to their pseudonyms.

do not have a high school diploma. In South Creek, 67% have advanced education beyond a high school diploma, 23.6% have just a high school diploma, and 8.9% do not have a high school diploma. Naples is described by one administrator in this way: "This is a culturally rich community. . . . [There are] some very high-level professionals who do contribute greatly to the school." One teacher describes it this way: "Such a fantastic demographic group. [The] parents, they're all surgeons and professors." In South Creek, administrators and teachers alike speak of their



strong community [and its] commitment to high quality education. It's what the expectation is. It's what makes it wonderful to work there and it's also part of what makes it challenging, frankly. [Children have] a number of opportunities that are provided for them by their family or by the community.

South Creek and Naples have large library collections and book centers in each classroom. The library at Naples is a more integral part of the reading program, and the extensive collection reflects this. Hundreds of books are displayed on open racks or on top of shelves, enticing and easily accessible. Both schools evidence a particularly visible emphasis on the fine and performing arts. Each has artwork prominently and professionally displayed throughout the buildings. In the entryway of Naples, there is a life-sized sculpture created by one child during an artist-in-residence program, and nearby there are three lighted glass display cases filled with children's artwork. One afternoon each week, everyone in the school attends a theatrical or musical performance by local artists, area high school students, or fellow students. South Creek is located near an art center that figures prominently in the school's life. A large ceramic mural representing a community project is showcased, and throughout the building children's work is framed and displayed. It is common to have artists in residence. The arts are highly-visible and integral aspects of these schools and communities.

South Creek Elementary School

South Creek School, located in a thriving village in a four-season resort area, is in an older building with evidence of multiple additions and renovations over the years. It is within walking distance of many shops and community recreation and cultural centers. Similar to other schools in the Uptown cluster of schools, the residents of South Creek have education and income levels that exceed the state average. Only 11% of the school's population qualifies for free or reduced-cost lunch. Teachers' salaries, at $43,328, are above the state average within this high socio-economic cluster. This is greater than Naples ($40,509), the other Uptown school in our study, and considerably higher than the highest average salaries of other successful schools in our study such as Elwood ($37,469, Main Street cluster) and Sommers ($29,583, Country cluster). The school is relatively large compared to typical Country and Main Street schools in Vermont. Its school population of 290 in grades K–5 is distributed among the following classrooms:

- **two half-day kindergarten classrooms**
- **two grade 1 classrooms**
- **two grade 2 classrooms**
- **one grade 1-2-3 multi-age classroom**
- **one grade 2-3 multi-age classroom**
- **two grade 3 classrooms**
- **two grade 4 classrooms**

Teachers and administrators alike speak of the advantages of the community. One teacher states that it is a

strong community first of all in terms of a commitment to high quality education; it's what the expectation is; it's what makes it wonderful to work here and it's also part of what makes it challenging, frankly. [Children have] a number of opportunities that are provided for them by their family or by the community.

Approaching the school, one is greeted by a hand-painted sign hanging over the entry: "Children Are Our Future." To ensure the well-being and success of "the future," the community of South Creek supports its children in many ways. The physical environment where daily learning takes place speaks to the priorities set by parents and teachers. There is a strong and visible emphasis on the fine and performing arts. Children's art work, usually created under the tutelage of a visiting artist, adorns the walls of the school. Inspirational and thought-provoking quotes are posted in strategic places, and children's original stories are carefully displayed on hallway walls adjacent to classrooms. Large library collections and book centers in classrooms are typical of this successful school. Rodney, the principal since 1993–94, enthusiastically, regularly, and proudly shares the school's culture and classroom climates with frequent visitors, parents, educators, and community members.

Knowledge, expertise, and opportunity to read

Using a basal

In South Creek, what was referred to as a "mish-mash" of philosophies was consolidated into a new vision of literacy instruction anchored by a basal program. Individual classroom teachers carry out this program within the framework of a daily language arts block. Children read the selected "story of the week" in homogeneous groups. Regardless of reading ability, all children in a grade are expected to read the same book. In addition, they are also encouraged to be part of impromptu book discussion groups, thematic reading, and/or enrichment opportunities. Margaret, a multi-age teacher, explained how she

use[s] chapter books outside of [the basal series]; we kind of go in and out of the series. Depending on the theme we happen to be doing we do a chapter book around that, and they have to read a lot of independent books. . . . I try to really get around that room with having children read to me, read to me, read to me, just to develop fluency.

Word-level work takes place in groups, primarily through grammar and vocabulary workbooks, as well as through more eclectic spelling instruction. The staff is in the process of redesigning the spelling program. Margaret echoed her colleagues when she explained how

the literacy series dictates the groups as far as what the story of the week will be, but as far as spelling groups and decoding groups, they are done by my assessments of what their skills are and what they need at the time—so I pull them either individually or in small groups depending on what I'm teaching, and I know who needs what. Sometimes with the whole class [we'll do] some kind of story mapping.

An observation of Margaret's classroom confirmed her description. Field notes depict her working with small groups of children and some individuals during a one-hour block of time:

Margaret conveys a writing task to the entire class ("Write about your favorite holiday. Why do you like it? What do you do that makes it special?"), the children immediately settle into their work, and she calls a group of five together for a spelling lesson. They take a close look at words ending with "y" and the sounds they can make: as in "story," "play," "dry," and "by." ("We'll talk about that later. . ."). Meanwhile, a parent volunteer arrives and begins circulating among the children offering support as needed, as does the early literacy specialist who works with two small groups during her 20 minutes in the classroom. Margaret meets with a group as the observer focuses on the specialist and then calls on another to analyze the number of "sounds versus letters" there are in selected words. When that group disperses she checks on two individuals and then calls another group. This final group of the morning concentrates on their basal practice book, which includes a series of comprehension questions. Margaret winds down the block of time by supporting individuals and critiquing their work with them.

With the basal series as the foundation, a first-grade classroom showed similar practices. Field notes describe

- *a morning message that asks children to "fill in the blank" with letters/words that focus on consonant sounds in initial and medial positions, sight words, and capitalization*
- *a review of the week's spelling list*
- *children as a whole group auditorally identifying words that rhyme or alliterate (such as time/crime; chime/chick)*

- ***Judy, the teacher, working with a small group on elements of story and subsequent character parts to act out (based on the basal story just read)***

One of the fourth-grade teachers, Catherine, describes how her program is set up this year to accommodate a class of students who

don't really want to listen, so I just needed them to be really small groups with their peers. At this point everybody is reading the same story in the literature anthology so some kids read the stories to themselves, some read with an adult, with a volunteer who comes in, but then each group of three students is on a language arts team and the language arts team is comprised of one student who is "the expert" in spelling for the week, another who is the "expert" in grammar and one is the "expert" in the practice book comprehension for the week.

In addition, one day a week the children take part in team leader meetings. Thus, one person from each team goes to a grammar meeting, spelling meeting, and practice book meeting. She emphasizes the learning that occurs "for [themselves] but also they are doing it knowing that they are going to have to teach their classmates." Caroline states that she is satisfied with how this model has worked this year.

I like what it's doing for this class, I have never done it before but I just saw a need. I have a big class, a lot of chiefs, a lot of kids who want to be chiefs so that does work for them.

Thus, the newly acquired basal program acts as a foundation for the common curriculum as each individual classroom teacher, with the support of the early

literacy specialist and enrichment and remedial opportunities, implements it according to her or his style and knowledge about the particular class.

Opportunity within the basal framework

Although South Creek has adopted a basal series for its uniformity in approach and material, time is also devoted to individual reading. (**See Table 1**). There are large quantities of books in most of the classrooms, and sustained silent reading (SSR) and read-aloud are rituals. The library is very generously stocked with books and other resources, and the librarian works closely with classroom teachers to support and complement the curriculum and children's interests.

The teachers are universally committed to the literature anthology component of the basal series (and the commitment to read *one* story per grade level per week), but they also express their need to be flexible with its use and supplements. Cherie, a third grade teacher stated:

> ***This year the series and my students match pretty well. Some years I've had to really select other literature and really focus on decoding. There were those things that the class wasn't ready for, and, also in the other extreme, I had children who were way above the third grade series.***

Thus, while the series' story of the week is being implemented, most of the children are also involved in impromptu book discussion groups, thematic reading, and enrichment opportunities. During field observations, some of Cherie's third-graders were participating in book discussion groups; one reading *Jimmy Spoon*; another just beginning *Sacajewea*. Catherine's fourth-grade class had just

finished one book of the *Soup* series and were signing up voluntarily to read another. The "top 20%" of children usually have an opportunity to take part in "enrichment experiences." Nancy, the enrichment teacher, describes how the third- through fifth-graders have "their literacy series compacted, and these kids come to me twice a week. Starting in first grade, teachers identify people that they think need to have more than what is happening in their classrooms." Nancy also puts out the school newspaper, has a gardener's class (open to everyone), and oversees ten academic challenge courses (two per grade level, math and language arts).

Management, opportunity, and the basal program

The credentials of this veteran staff show evidence of continuous graduate coursework and credits. Ten out of the 11 K–4 teachers have their master's degree plus credits (the eleventh is in the process of completing an M.Ed.). They are very serious and committed to their professional development and are looked at as teacher experts. They are frequently tapped by the principal to lead coursework within the K–12 district. He states, "We've got people with advanced degrees and I've got to let them be the leaders and provide opportunities for them to be leaders. [We need to] let people see the success of having their own colleagues lead them."

Like the other successful schools in this study, teachers at South Creek manage their literacy instruction expertly. The flow of the day is orchestrated beautifully; children know what is expected of them and proceed accordingly. Little, if any, undue time is spent on transitions and behavior issues. As noted previously with regard to Margaret, she competently facilitated instruction with four different groups, guided a parent volunteer, worked with the early literacy specialist,

and worked with individual children, all within an hour's block of time.

Pat, one of the multi-age teachers, also balances using the basal series with meeting the individual needs of the children. She states that the basal frames her program, and that it is within that framework that she is able to address individual needs:

Following the literacy series has given me the crutch to then build those levels and supports within. What the literacy series has done for me is it is sequential and the skills are building upon each other. Whereas, honestly, when I was developing this on my own I was just really pulling things [from everywhere] so this has kept me organized and focused and I am using the literacy series as a skeleton. . . . This week, for example, second grade is focusing on making predictions, cause and effect; third grade is working on two different skills.

Margaret describes how

[my] assessments have gotten stronger. I had all this information on kids and didn't know how to use it and now I know how to use it. The assessment piece has become stronger for me, knowing why I do things and being able to share that with parents and feel very comfortable about knowing exactly where their child is.

Julie, the early literacy specialist, states that the staff

has had a real commitment to literacy in terms of really trying to address literacy training and literacy acquisition for a long time. We have made a real effort to try to work on literacy across the entire school.

Leadership, professional development, and commitment

South Creek began looking seriously at its language arts curricula in 1988. They wanted to increase the coordination of their language arts curriculum program across and within grades, increase communication among teachers, and include more intentional word-level instruction in their literacy program. The assistant superintendent (and former principal of the elementary school) had an energetic agenda that included integrating more specific skill instruction and creating more continuity of instruction throughout the school. Teachers were using a variety of methods and materials with little agreement about the goals for the language arts program. Teachers' practices were informed by substantial personal professional development but did not form a common core of agreed-upon goals. The school was described by teachers and administrators alike as a "mish-mash" of instructional practices with "whole language and phonics camps." Also, the assistant superintendent expressed the community's view that, as a school, they must always keep improving. He stated, "It's a community where good is not good enough and this whole issue about continuous improvement is pervasive."

Thus, a literacy assessment course that all staff and administration took in 1994–1995 led to the development and implementation of a

> ***language arts curriculum, the literacy series, and the assessment portfolio. It is the backbone of what we do and as a faculty we decided what would be in that assessment folder. . . it drives instruction a lot.***

FIGURE 4

Long-term commitment to literacy of successful vs. less-successful Uptown schools, 1988-1998

	NAPLES	SOUTH CREEK	*ROYCE**	VERMONT
1987-1988	**STABLE**** Naples is a stable school with shared commitment to literacy; teachers' different points of view seen as an asset	*** "mish-mash" of instructional practices; phonics and whole language camps	administrative transience in the school and district; wide variety of professional development; teacher autonomy in utilizing the old model for using support personnel	**COMM; PFS**
1988-1989				**PSA; RR**
1989-1990				
1990-1991	**CURREV; WORDL** outside consultant hired to evaluate the curriculum; continuity and communication result; word-level work identified as a focus	**PRIN** new assistant principal; more skill instruction; desire for continuity and uniformity of instruction		
1991-1992				**PFS**
1992-1993	**LA** new Language Arts curriculum completed and implemented, based on the outside evaluation of the school curriculum	**LA** new Language Arts curriculum completed under the direction of the new principal		
1993-1994				ROPA
1994-1995	**LA** new Language Arts curriculum completed and implemented.	**LA** new Language Arts curriculum implemented.		VISMT; PFS
1995-1996	**LBASED; PHAW** Naples develops teaching teams and literature based literacy program with grade level literature, word level study, and phonological awareness training	**BASAL** basal program adopted; schoolwide staff development and training in the organization of the basal program		STDS
1996-1997			**PRIN; CURRC; SUPT; BASAL** over a two-year period a new superintendent, principal, curriculum coordinator, and literacy "coach"; basal program adopted	NSRE
1997-1998	**ST** high scores on the VT DRA and NSRE statewide tests	**ST** high scores on the VT DRA and NSRE statewide tests		VT DRA

* *Royce* is the less-successful school. ** Abbreviations identify the nature of continuous development within the school or school district. **Abbreviation descriptions can be found on page 114.** *** *Solid lines* indicate the duration of continuous development within the school or school district; *dashed lines* indicate the absence of continuous development.

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A few years later an early literacy facilitator position was created to

teach the teachers what, based on current research, we know children need in order to become literate. One [piece] of which is phonological awareness; the other piece is explicit instruction in phonics at the early stages—how to develop reading fluency and how to develop comprehension skills.

Julie, a former special educator and currently the early literacy facilitator, describes her job as follows: "to help teachers plan their time, know what they need to do in their classrooms to meet children's needs, and how they can be more diagnostic in terms of understanding what each child needs for the classroom."

School community

The teachers in South Creek, as in the other successful schools in our study, have a genuine respect for each other. All will admit to their past inclinations towards "whole language" versus "phonics," but can see how working together and articulating a shared vision (via the language arts curriculum work) led to the success of students on the statewide literacy assessments.

Nancy, the enrichment teacher who comes in contact with all the teachers, states:

One of the real miracles here is how people team, everybody works together, you don't get the feeling that someone is trying to outshine someone else; you really get the feeling that you're all pulling together . . . teachers feel really empowered by our administrator. There is a feeling of teamwork, even with our principal, that he's part of the team and he's very approachable.

The relationships and understanding that have developed out of the professional interactions among teachers and administrators have led South Creek down a path of consensus-building, shared vision, and respect. The staff value and welcome discourse and have discovered that they can learn from each other.

When the teachers of South Creek discuss literacy, or any aspect of the curriculum, the role of parents and the community is always an important part of the conversation. Teachers and administrators describe how parents value education and communicate that to their children in many ways. "Being at school is important, doing well at school is important. This community has many parents who are very supportive of the school efforts and they do things to enrich that at home."

Conclusions about South Creek Elementary School

South Creek is a successful school. Teachers at South Creek would aver that their community and district leadership, and the willingness to build a consensus, have made the difference over the past 10 to 15 years. The move to the basal program made sense and fit with the configuration of factors operating at South Creek in the 1980s and 1990s. It is interesting that at a time when instruction was a "mish-mash" of approaches reflecting whole language and phonics wars, South Creek turned to the structured, common curriculum of the basal. The size of South Creek may have played a role in this decision. It seems that in a time of struggle and low performance, a large school might turn to a program that put teachers and administrators on the same page, as it were. Most important, the decision to move to the basal was made in the context of stable leadership, coherence in professional development, commitment, and, perhaps as a result,

a sense of community. Throughout all the schools we studied, what is common to high-performing schools is not the type of program, but the commitment to a curriculum, to communication, to expertise, and to decision-making.

Naples Elementary School

Naples and South Creek are both members of our Uptown school cluster, representing approximately 16% of all the schools in Vermont. As is true for all schools in this cluster, Naples, like South Creek, is a bit larger than other schools in Vermont, with a school population of 300 students in grades K–5 distributed among the following classrooms:

- **two kindergarten classrooms**
- **two grade 1 classrooms**
- **three grade 2 classrooms**
- **four grade 3 classrooms**
- **three grade 4 classrooms**

The Uptown schools also have more resources than schools in the Country or Main Street clusters. Naples is adjacent to a densely-populated college town and urban center. It is in a newly renovated 100-year-old building, surrounded by woods, the village green, and town offices. Within walking distance there are several old homes converted into offices, some shops, the requisite country store, and a high-volume, locally-owned bookstore.

Similar to the other schools in this cluster, the residents of Naples and South Creek have education and income levels that exceed the state average. Consistent with the cluster, 89% of the residents of Naples have advanced education

beyond a high school diploma, 12.6 % have just a high school diploma, and 8.7% do not have a high school diploma. Teachers' salaries, at $40,509, are above the state average within this high socio-economic cluster. This is slightly less than South Creek ($43,328) but considerably higher than the highest average salaries of the schools in our study, for example, Elwood ($37,469, Main Street cluster) and Sommers ($29,583, Country cluster). Naples was described by one admin-istrator as a "culturally rich community. [There are] some very high-level professionals who do contribute greatly to the school." One teacher described the community as "a fantastic demographic group," with parents who are "all surgeons and professors."

Naples and South Creek have large library collections and book centers in each classroom. The library at Naples is a more integral part of the reading program, and the extensive collection reflects this. Hundreds of books are displayed on open racks or on top of shelves, enticing and easily accessible. Both Naples and South Creek evidence a particularly visible emphasis on the fine and performing arts. Each has artwork prominently and professionally displayed throughout the buildings. In the entry way of Naples there is a life-sized sculpture created by one child during an artist-in-residence program, while nearby there are three lighted glass display cases filled with children's artwork. One afternoon each week everyone in the school attends a theatrical or musical performance by local artists, area high school students, or fellow students.

Knowledge, expertise, and opportunity to read

Uptown routes to success: Literature-based and basal approaches

Naples and South Creek can both be characterized as devoting large amounts of time to reading. Uninterrupted sustained silent reading is a ritual in all classrooms in both schools. Students have silent reading time for approximately 25 minutes per day at South Creek and approximately 60 minutes per day at Naples. In addition, it is a strong tradition that teachers at Naples read aloud to their students daily for approximately 40 minutes. The new language arts curriculum requires that teachers read aloud to children daily for a minimum of 30 minutes. Children at Naples also visit the school library two times per week for approximately 30 minutes to read and browse for books. Children go to the library one other time each week to meet with the librarian for ongoing genre and author discussions. Aside from the 15-minutes-per-day of word-level work (primarily in spelling), the children at Naples predominantly read and appreciate literature as well as reading extensively in their subject-area studies.

Naples and South Creek differ significantly in their grouping practices for literacy instruction. Because of its adherence to the basal program, South Creek groups its students homogeneously for reading instruction. At Naples, children self-select literature and read continually; teachers give one-to-one support or instruction as the need arises, and there are occasionally small groups formed by ability in first, second, and third grade. In fourth and fifth grade there is no ability grouping for reading, although occasionally small heterogeneous book groups are formed. With respect to skill work, South Creek has children meet in groups to work on specific skills; Naples, on the other hand, believes children are learning necessary skills and strategies within the context of their literature work. Group work for skill development is a rare occurrence.

Of particular interest is the way in which the needs of high-achieving and challenged students are addressed in these schools. With regard to high-achieving students at South Creek, there is teacher-guided enrichment work for those who finish the requirements of basal work. At Naples, it is assumed that all children will participate in all aspects of classroom activity, with enrichment considered a basic requirement for all children. Those children who are high-functioning readers continue to read appropriately challenging texts related to whatever is being studied in the classroom, and the teacher works closely with the librarian to appropriately match books and children.

It appears that the schools reverse practices when it comes to challenged readers. Recently at South Creek, a new model of support for challenged readers has been introduced at the K–3 level. The early literacy facilitator works directly in classrooms during the language arts block, usually on very specific skills work. Thus, lower-functioning readers are supported in their classrooms and continue to read (or be read to, or listen to a tape of) the same materials as everyone else. At Naples, the children primarily go outside the classroom to work with the learning specialists or special educator on specific skills, after which they return to the classroom and participate in all other activities fully. The teacher and the librarian then work closely together to find effective matches between book and child.

Leadership, professional development, and commitment

Each of the Uptown schools in our study began looking more seriously at their language arts curricula in the late 1980s. (See Figure 4). Although the impetus and goals for curriculum revision were similar, they were voiced in different manners. The stories of these two schools with similar resources and communities are quite different. Both Naples and South Creek wanted to increase the coordination of their language arts program across and within grades, increase communication among teachers, and include more intentional word-level instruction in their literacy program. However, the underlying assumptions about literacy differ in these two communities, and the manner in which each resolves these similar issues of coherence and communication differ substantially.

The impetus for change at Naples comes from a problem of redundancy of topical units of study from one year to the next and the need to increase teacher communication within and across the grades. In addition, some concern about spelling and mechanics at the upper elementary level was voiced by parents. In contrast to the "mish-mash" of approaches at South Creek, Naples has a long tradition of a clear and deeply embedded view of what it means to be literate and well-educated. The principal of 20-plus years and the librarian were strong leaders in hiring, training, and inculcating these values. They inspired the vision of reading as a way of living in a classical sense, that books and thinking are the essence of a civilized existence. Administrators and teachers consistently focus on extensive reading of high-quality literature and reading as an important life activity. At the same time, unique teaching styles are celebrated. The principal hired intelligent people with specific areas of expertise who believed in learning through active engagement. Nearly all of the teachers have liberal arts undergraduate degrees; licensure was achieved by enrolling in an internship-based

program. As noted by one teacher, "[the teachers and principal] really value, strongly value, people who are...well-educated in a traditional liberal education."

Naples and South Creek created different processes for reviewing and revising their language arts curriculum. South Creek relied on an "inservice" model, bringing in reading experts to supplement their internal literacy expertise. Naples hired an outside consultant to do an inventory of the language arts program and to make recommendations for improving the program. In 1995, each school adopted and began implementing a new written language arts curriculum. Although these curricula were developed essentially for the same reasons—to reduce redundancy, facilitate communication among teachers within and across grade levels, increase explicit word-level instruction, and to reflect local norms and expectations for learning and teaching—the results were quite different.

At South Creek the previous "mish-mash" of philosophies and approaches was consolidated into a new vision of literacy instruction that was guided by the basal literacy series. At Naples, the teachers and administrators established teams and regular meeting times in the teachers' schedules for bi-weekly team and grade-level meetings. The librarian, as the literature and literacy leader in the building, led the way in supporting the teachers with the new arrangement of literature units in the new curriculum. The concern about spelling skills was addressed by a team of teachers and special educators who took a course and then developed their own phonological awareness program for first grade, and a word-level program for second and third grades. These people have offered to come into other classrooms to help introduce these materials. Over the past two to three years they have been invited into all the primary-grade classrooms. At this point, all teachers talk about using these "home grown" programs or an adaptation.

Ultimately similar materials are collected for the fourth and fifth grades. One teacher said:

> ***I'm just kind of amazed how people have come around in the school; ... it's probably because no one is mandated, but [instead] they're encouraging them. . . . We were getting a lot of the fall-out from parents who were saying our kids can't spell. So [interested teachers and special educators] began to support the idea and introduced more systematic spelling programs within their classrooms, but also with the expectation that everyone else would do the same thing. . . . [We were] working with each other as opposed to any mandate from above you.***

As a result of this process, Naples maintained its strong vision of literacy and learning and began to "fine tune" some aspects of its teaching and communication. Specific genre studies and books for each grade level for read-aloud and discussion groups were integrated into the curriculum. To facilitate communication, the schedule was revised to include regular meetings within and across grade levels.

School community

The Naples community holds values and beliefs in line with their socio-economic status. The citizens of Naples are literate; families read often with children. Families and children have books, parents are interested in their children's education, and they participate in the life of the school. To a degree, staff members at Naples attribute students' high performance to the children's innate abilities and their educated, upper-income families:

The community [has a] high level of resources, people travel, they have books, they go to museums regularly, and they don't work and [they] have more time with their children (BX, teacher interview).

I think there is just some innate ability that they come with, that their parents are successful and value education and have done a lot with education, and I think that there is just some of the innate ability to acquire language and use language that works to their benefit (KH, teacher interview).

However, teachers are explicit about their own intellectual caliber, liberal arts background, individual areas of subject-matter expertise, and the fact that as a faculty they are committed and passionate about children's learning. In the same way that the children bring inherent strengths, the teachers, too, characterize themselves as bringing inherent strengths or strengths not developed within teacher training or state education institutions. Their inherent high expectations for themselves and their students derive from personal characteristics and result in an ethos of high expectations within the school:

The teachers are very passionate about education. . . . They believe strongly, so I think they are a very, very committed group of teachers, passionate about exposing kids to a broad range of experiences. . . . They really value, strongly value, people who are well-educated in a traditional liberal education (LH, teacher interview).

The teachers spend a lot of time, they are well trained, very hard working . . . . A good proportion of the teachers are not teacher-education trained. [They have] a degree in something else and then came to teaching, maybe a little older and had some practical experience. Teacher-education courses are mostly a total waste so I think really it's the caliber of the teachers (NC, teacher interview).

I think the teachers are better in this school. . . . I think there are expectations on the teachers that are here that are not [elsewhere], so I think that they're good teachers (CJ, teacher interview).

It becomes clear that the strengths of the students and their teachers are complemented by a strong building-level leadership, a sense of vision, and a strong degree of communication and collaboration among teachers and across grades.

You keep learning. Everyone is excited and everyone shares things. But I think what it really comes down to, in terms of what made me a better teacher, has to do with collaboration and sharing and that's always raising the bar. And for the administration to have that as an expectation, I think it just trickles upward from there . . . . If [collaboration is] an expectation at grade levels . . . each week I'll be sharing something that I'm doing or she'll be sharing what she'll be doing . . . that just makes it better (CJ, teacher interview).

[There's] a shared commitment. . . . The principal hired [teachers] according to [their philosophy of] development and individual belief, a holistic kind of approach. I think everybody as far as I can tell is pretty much committed to that. We all really work together as a team. [Art and music] reinforces what I'm doing. . . . It enhances whatever it might be, whether it's the westward movement or Native American mythology, a folk tale. It just makes [for] a fuller, larger experience. It's more engaging and more rewarding and more interesting for the kids. They just get more . . . I give a hundred percent credit to the librarian. [She] is just so incredibly knowledgeable, so therefore, the teachers are [more knowledgeable] about children's literature and about what you can do with it. She's always sharing the information with us, and we're just all kind of committed to literacy... it wouldn't necessarily be as good as it is if we didn't have someone [like her] (UA, teacher interview).

Summary of successful Uptown schools

Naples and South Creek are successful schools. Naples has had a history of high achievement. Teachers at Naples would aver that their own competence and the children's backgrounds account for this tradition of performance. Teachers at South Creek would aver that their community and district leadership, and the willingness to build a consensus, have made the difference over the past 10 to 15 years. The move to the basal series made sense and fit with the configuration of factors operating at South Creek in the 1980s and 1990s. It is interesting that at a time when instruction was a "mish-mash" of approaches reflecting whole language and phonics wars, South Creek turned to the structured, common curriculum of the basal, whereas Naples, working from a stable school environment, built on the perception of the teachers' autonomy and expertise.

Naples and South Creek schools reveal different literacy programs. Naples has constructed an individualized, self-selected reading program that is literature-based. The teachers employ unique teaching styles and expertise. The nature of literacy instruction in Naples is shaped by a balanced literacy curriculum including non-overlapping literature units and systematic attention to skills. In contrast, South Creek's literacy program is structured by a basal reading program chosen to create uniformity, consistency, and accountability among teachers. In addition, the school designed a self-developed language arts curriculum and an assessment portfolio.

Although Naples and South Creek may benefit from what a high socio-economic and highly educated community brings to its schools, and although their literacy programs have different strengths, it remains the case that what is common to

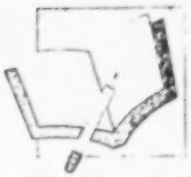
Naples and South Creek is stability in leadership, coherence in professional development, commitment, and perhaps as a result, a sense of community. That these attributes, along with the school-specific program attributes, are real is made abundantly clear by comparison with a less-successful school in the Uptown cluster.

Contrast with a less-successful literacy environment: *Royce Elementary School*

The basal program grounded the teachers and administrators at South Creek, while allowing them to pursue, in the name of enrichment, what at an earlier time might have been called whole language activities. South Creek's decision does not generalize. Naples, the other successful school in the Uptown cluster, developed a literature-based program. The successful Country schools worked within the guidelines of Reading Recovery, and the successful Main Street schools juxtaposed pieces of a number of approaches in defining their eclectic programs. Royce, the less-successful Uptown school in our study, reveals more of an eclectic approach but lacks the belief in or commitment to its eclecticism or any aspect of it. Field note summaries conclude that

there is a language arts curriculum and a recently adopted basal reading program; however, not everyone uses the program with any fidelity, and most pick and choose from it.

As at other less-successful schools, Royce teachers struggle with their isolation and uncertainty about the best approach to take, resulting in an inconsistency in the quality of instruction across grades and teachers. As recorded in field notes, instruction seemed generally



cumbersome and there is a great deal of teacher talk and focus on task completion. The classes are very orderly and well-managed, but almost all literacy work is teacher-directed with kids all doing the same thing at the same time.

Perhaps as a result of the lack of coherence and commitment, the simple yet critical element of abundant reading opportunity was not evident. With regard to opportunity to read, the contrast between Royce, South Creek, and Naples is staggering. The number and accessibility of books in the classrooms is noticeably lower at Royce. Field notes on Royce describe

considerable variation, but as a general proposition very little reading of connected text was evident. There was no discussion of texts except in a 1–2 multi-age. . . . [with few exceptions] lots of books were not accessible. Many of these were multiple-copy books used in the past for instruction. Others were behind curtains and closed doors, or in boxes.

The community's relation to Royce Elementary is ambiguous. The perception at Royce is that parents do not spend the time to enrich the school's efforts. Whether perception or reality, Royce does not have the same type of parent–teacher communication, involvement, and commitment that exist at South Creek and Naples.

It is difficult not to conclude that a major reason for the fragmented relationships among staff, administrators, and community at Royce is the instability in leadership over the years. There have been four principals since 1994 and three superintendents during the same period. Prior to 1998, there was no district curriculum coordinator nor literacy expert or reading specialist in the school.

Ultimately, it is the teachers as a group and the community they form that appears directly related to what is or is not occurring in classrooms. The lack of a commitment to particular programs, practices, or principles is evident in the lack of agreement on grouping practices and how to use extra teachers effectively. Without agreement it is difficult to coordinate program-enhancing, school-wide professional development. Although there is respect for how hard-working and well-intentioned everyone is, there is no universal respect for the knowledge or practice teachers bring to their grade-level work. As noted at Ellis, the less-successful Country school, tensions tend to manifest themselves between grade levels or ranges of grades. For example, if the fourth-grade students are not performing well, it is the result of the inappropriateness of instruction at third grade; if performance is low on the VT-DRA at second grade, second-grade teachers tend to point to the K–1 instruction for an explanation. Without the consensus-building, shared vision, and respect evidenced at South Creek and Naples, this school struggles to bring to its students the optimal context for learning each day and each year of their time in the elementary school.

Lessons from Uptown

In effect, the Uptown school does not have diversity to the extent that the Main Street or Country schools do. Whether it be with respect to class, race, or ethnicity, the Uptown community is relatively homogeneous. The community is primarily composed of middle- and upper-middle class, Anglo, English-speaking, and U.S.-born citizens. In other words, the community provides high socio-economic status input to the schools. These schools reside happily in their community. We should not underestimate that, in terms of culture, the teachers reflect the community and in many cases come from it. The common cultural background among the children, teachers, and school community helps to

prevent the kind of gate-keeping that occurs when teachers and students do not share cultural norms.

However, as the example of Royce shows, this homogeneity is not a sufficient reason for success. It appears that within this social context and given Uptown school characteristics (larger school, larger faculty and staff, and slightly larger class sizes and teacher–pupil ratios) certain choices can be made. One choice seems to be that whatever approach is developed, the teachers must retain a high level of autonomy and exercise responsive decision-making. In the successful Uptown schools this is the case. In the Uptown context this is so whether it be in the individualized implementation of the basal program and the organization of supplementary opportunities to read at South Creek, or in the teacher's organization of an individualized, literature-based classroom program at Naples.

Clearly, the nature of the autonomy and decision-making is different given the approaches of the two schools. In the case of South Creek, the choice was made for uniformity across a large school—hence the basal program. Royce, rudderless over the past 15 years, seems righted by a new district and school leadership. It will be interesting to see if they choose to go the way of structure and uniformity by choosing a school-wide basal series. It is unlikely that all low-performing schools need structure and uniformity as provided by a basal series. As noted, in the Country and Main Street clusters basals do not figure as a solution. The challenge of size in the Uptown school, within classrooms and across faculty, may have played a role in choosing a basal series. Given that choice, a number of faculty and students placed a premium on a responsive use of the basal tool in order to ensure high levels of learning for the children of the school.

In the case of Naples, the choice had been made much earlier to build programs at the classroom level that were highly individualized, literature-based, and reliant on the teacher's knowledge and expertise. Again, given the Uptown context, this choice may be the flip side of the basal choice. It seems highly unlikely that a large faculty could reach agreement on a focused approach to literacy instruction that was implemented among the small, successful, rural Country schools in their move to Reading Recovery-based practices. It may also be the case that the eclecticism of the Main Street classrooms, framed by common assessment tools, would lead to fragmented, contradictory, unmonitored approaches in the larger Uptown setting. Royce is somewhat illustrative of an eclectic approach in a state of disunity in the larger setting. Hence, Naples, from a position of strength and stability, is able to rely on its strongest resources to develop a program consistently individual and progressive throughout the grades. These resources include a faculty that has been cultivated for particular attributes through the hiring practices of a longtime principal, a high socio-economic status community, and a liberal, charismatic leadership.

Conclusions

All of the successful schools in our study, with the possible exception of Naples, represent schools that made changes in response to a time of struggle and low performance eight to ten years prior to the new 1998 reading tests in Vermont that are administered at second and fourth grades. In a situation where people are concerned about student performance, these schools engaged in activities and made decisions that have had felicitous effects, not just on student performance, but also on the professional confidence and satisfaction of individuals working in these schools.

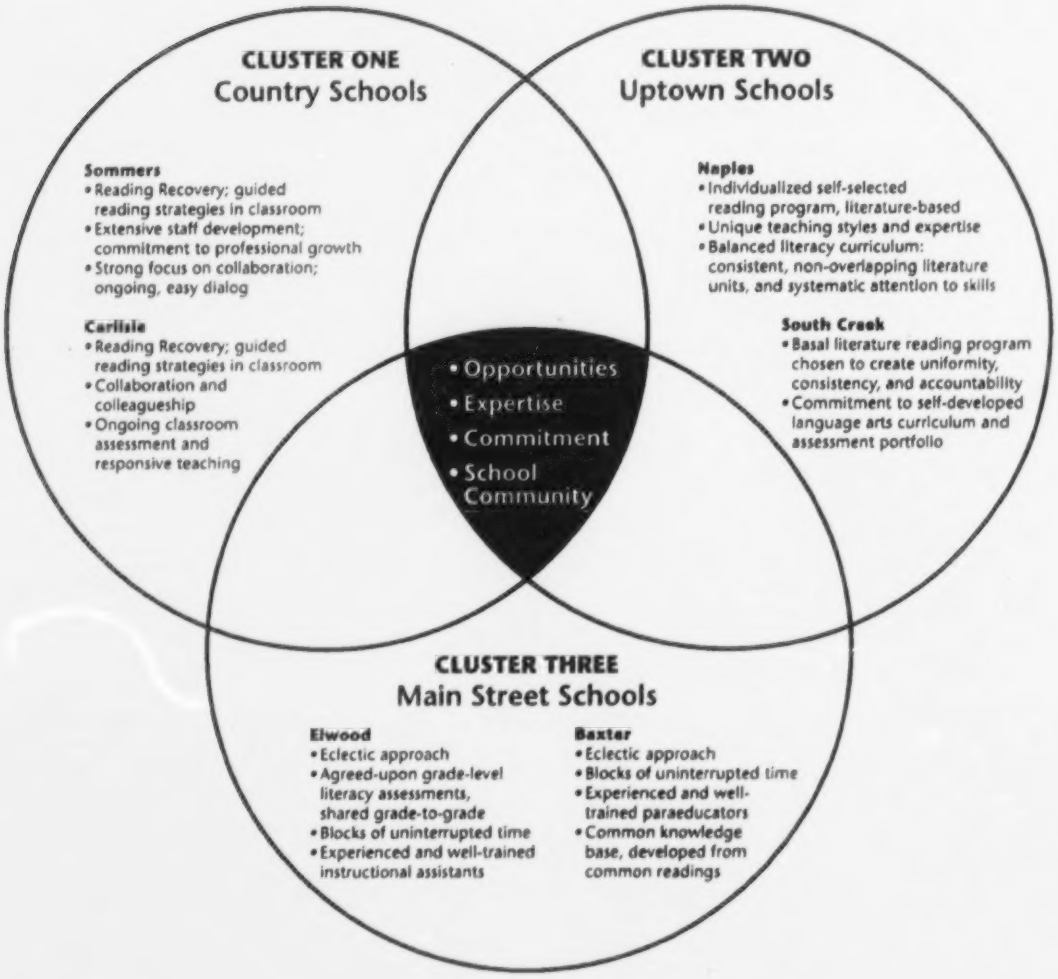
It is important to note that the larger context for these changes involved far more than state-wide testing. Vermont has been involved in an unusually active and productive period of educational engagement. An examination of the state-wide timeline for the ten-year period that was so important to these schools reveals a wide range of professional activity at the state level. For example, the state has conducted a public school approval process that brought libraries, gyms, and support faculty to many schools. It has sponsored or launched Reading Recovery consortia around the state. Vermont has used portfolio assessments to create networks of teacher–leaders who are knowledgeable about both content and professional development. The state has also conducted hundreds of teaching and assessment workshops. In addition, grassroots efforts supporting whole language and multi-age instruction produced additional examination of

instructional practice. Thus, the impetus for change was certainly not test results alone, but rather a complex array of opportunities and choices that encouraged change.

Within and throughout clusters and classrooms in this study, their choices led to a great diversity of practices. Whether instruction variation is reflected in literature-based programs or school-wide basal programs, there is no consistent picture of a high-performing school or classroom, regardless of the community served by the school. What seems clear is that throughout and within clusters, high-performing schools manifest a significant degree of autonomy for teachers within schools to make decisions about how to shape their literacy programs, whether as a coherent literacy program across grades or selective by teacher. This autonomy is a right or responsibility exercised; teachers within the schools communicate, and the conversation appears to have been going on over a number of years. In addition, the teachers' autonomy within the school appears to be complemented by leadership from one or more of a variety of sources—an individual teacher, a school librarian, a principal, a district curriculum coordinator, or some other educator.

These findings, represented in **Figure 5**, suggest that schools of varying demographic status can be successful sites of learning. Teachers appear able to refine or reinvent themselves over time. The key factors for success, at this point, appear to be based on individual expertise, common focus on time spent reading, autonomy combined with system-wide support, dialogue among teachers combined with a common focus on children learning, and curricular and instructional leadership.

FIGURE 5
Influences on Success in High-Performing Schools


CLUSTER ONE
Country Schools
Sommers
• Reading Recovery; guided reading strategies in classroom
• Extensive staff development; commitment to professional growth
• Strong focus on collaboration; ongoing, easy dialog
Carlisle
• Reading Recovery; guided reading strategies in classroom
• Collaboration and colleagueship
• Ongoing classroom assessment and responsive teaching
CLUSTER TWO
Uptown Schools
Naples
• Individualized self-selected reading program, literature-based
• Unique teaching styles and expertise
• Balanced literacy curriculum: consistent, non-overlapping literature units, and systematic attention to skills
South Creek
• Basal literature reading program chosen to create uniformity, consistency, and accountability
• Commitment to self-developed language arts curriculum and assessment portfolio
• Opportunities
• Expertise
• Commitment
• School Community
CLUSTER THREE
Main Street Schools
Elwood
• Eclectic approach
• Agreed-upon grade-level literacy assessments, shared grade-to-grade
• Blocks of uninterrupted time
• Experienced and well-trained instructional assistants
Baxter
• Eclectic approach
• Blocks of uninterrupted time
• Experienced and well-trained paraeducators
• Common knowledge base, developed from common readings

This diagram represents the key components of why each school was successful within their cluster. In the center there are four factors that were found to be common across sites.

As we have seen, however, it is possible for autonomy to slide into inaction or lack of coherence. In the less-successful schools, lack of direction and a failure to re-examine practice often resulted in more limited student performance and a more divided faculty. As Fullan has noted, "Productive educational change roams somewhere between overcontrol and chaos. You cannot mandate what matters, because what really matters for complex goals of change are skills, creative thinking, and committed action" (1997, pp. 33-35). Sophisticated and articulate professional knowledge and committed action are clearly hallmarks of the educators in these successful schools.

Creative thinking is an important component as well. The choices a school makes are constrained by their community context. Large, well-resourced schools can make certain decisions; small, rural, ill-resourced schools can make other kinds of decisions. The situation of the school exerts a big influence on how success is manifested. However, it would be a great misinterpretation of the data of this study to see in the attributes of the community or school a casual relation between size and success, wealth and success, or program and success. The successful schools in our study are schools within which people made choices and worked in concert with others to make change. The environments of their schools made certain choices more possible or likely. But the success of the schools is the direct result of intelligent, inspired, communal choices made at the level of the school and classroom in such a way as to garner support, or at least acceptance, from the surrounding community. No teacher in any successful school complained about lack of community support, although the nature and extent of community resources and involvement were extraordinarily diverse. The schools seem to rest comfortably in their communities. The evolution of choices fed the development of opportunity, expertise, community, and commitment, which in turn fed success.

Defining success as high performance on tests trivializes the real success of these schools. Their success resides in the dynamic institutional community they created and maintain.

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

Key to abbreviations identifying the nature of continuous development* within a successful school or district.

Abbreviation	Description
PRIN	new principal appointed
RR	Reading Recovery Program or related training
PHAW	phonological awareness focus
ST	Vermont Developmental Reading Assessment implemented statewide at second grade; New Standards Reference Examination in reading implemented statewide at fourth grade
WLANG	Whole language focus or training
UNIV	role or influence of the University of Vermont
VT DRA	Vermont Developmental Reading Assessment implemented statewide at second grade
SPELL	spelling focus or training
PSA	Public School Approval rating by the state
LA	Language Arts focus or training
LIT	literacy focus or training
ASSM	assessment focus or training
SUPT	new superintendent appointed
STABLE	stable leadership and faculty over time
LITC	Literacy Coordinator appointed at the district level
CURREV	Curriculum evaluation
WORDL	Word-level focus or training
LBASED	Literacy-based program of instruction
BASAL	basal program of instruction in reading
CURRC	new Curriculum Coordinator appointed
COMM	new Vermont Commissioner of Education appointed
PFS	Vermont focus on portfolios for the assessment of math and writing statewide
ROPA	Results Oriented Program Approval implemented based on the portfolio assessment of preservice teachers
VISMT	Vermont Institute of Science, Math, and Technology, multimillion dollar federal/state grant to improve instruction and learning in science, math, and technology
STDS	Vermont Framework of Standard published to serve as the basis for a comprehensive statewide assessment
NSRE	New Standards Reference Examination in reading, writing, and math

* The occurrences noted in this list are occurrences that happened for a school during an eight- to ten-year time frame. It is not implied that each of the occurrences contributed directly in the continuous development of a school. Rather, they indicate that something was happening that was not a false start (for example, principal turnover) vs. anything happening for the school.

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